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WEEKLY

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l You Can Find Them on

e Island of Run Away

Breathtaking
Novelet by
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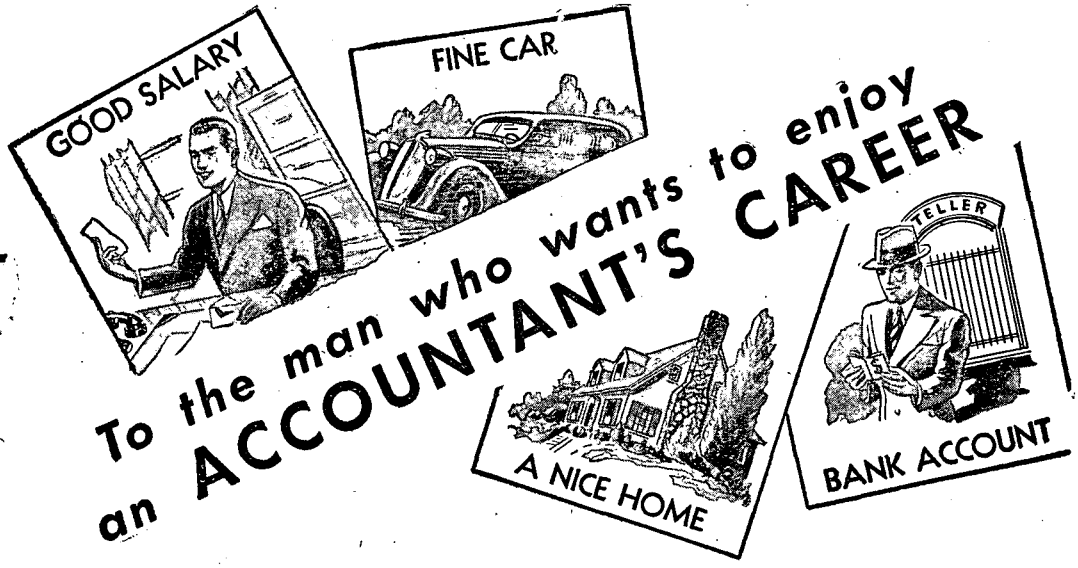


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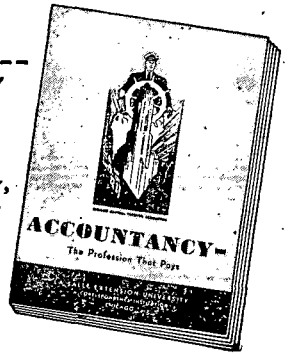


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Volume 300 CONTENTS FOR JULY 13, 1940 Number 4

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski
*Illustrating The Island of Run Away*

*This magazine is on sale every Wednesday*

*A* **RED STAR** *Magazine*

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WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary
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LONDON: THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4

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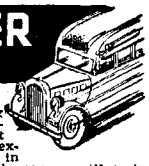

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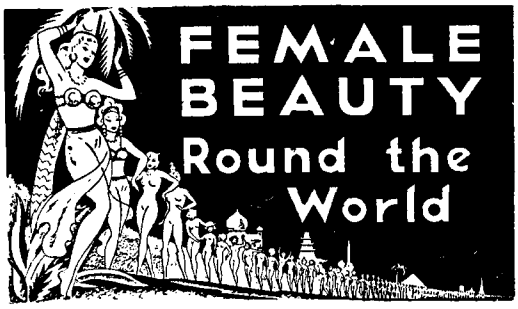


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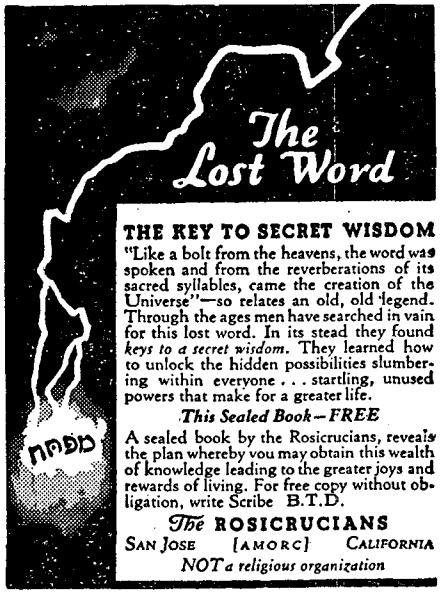
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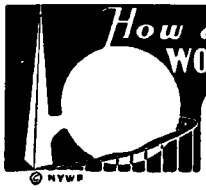


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# The Island of Run Away

*Exciting Novelet of Tropic Adventure*

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

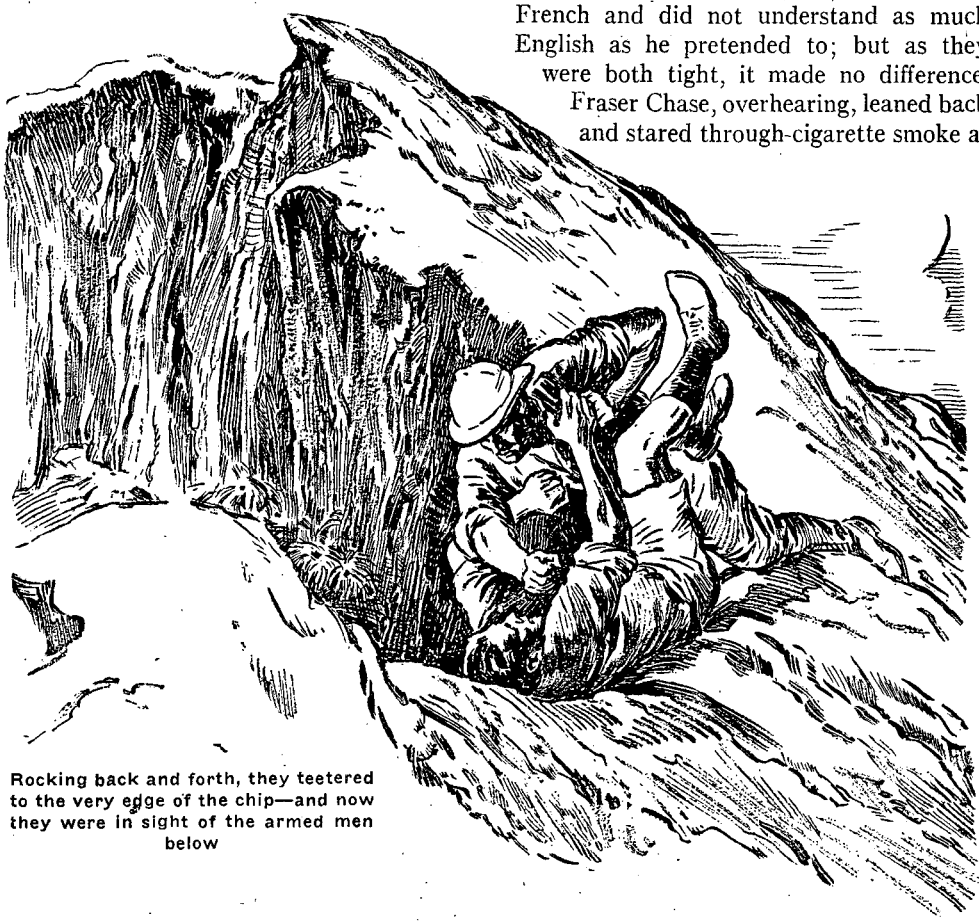
Author of "The Lake that Went Mad," "Gateway to Oblivion," etc.

I

"IF I WERE a murderer," said one of the men at the next table. He put down his rum punch and added hastily, "Of course I'm *not*—"

"Yiss, yiss," said the other man, beaming. He didn't get more than every fifth word his companion spoke, for he was French and did not understand as much English as he pretended to; but as they were both tight, it made no difference.

Fraser Chase, overhearing, leaned back and stared through cigarette smoke at



Rocking back and forth, they teetered to the very edge of the chip—and now they were in sight of the armed men below

**May we suggest a one-way excursion to that jewel of islands, Moemoeá, Paradise of the Pacific, where the natives are friendly, the constabulary finds no crime wave, and only the white man has bile. (P. S.: Recreation department requests visitors to provide their own artillery)**



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the ceiling. Of those in the cafe—for it was boat night in Papeete—he was unique in being thoughtful. He sat quietly in a corner sipping beer. Nobody noticed him, which was as he wanted it to be.

A Tahitian gal, shrieking with laughter, danced madly in the middle of the floor, and her half-caste *tane* danced behind her burlesquing all her twists. Songs were shouted back and forth, and five or six guitars were kept busy in as many parts of the place, each being strummed to a different melody.

A fight started at one end of the bar, between a drunken Englishman and an equally drunken Czech. Six *matelots,* their pompoms jogging, snakedanced noisily through the crowd. But Fraser Chase in his corner was silent and without motion.

"—but if I *were* a murderer, you know where I'd make for?"

The Frenchman laughed. When in doubt, his motto was, laugh. He took a drink of *vin rouge.*

"I'd head straight for Moemoeá," the New Zealander declared with vehemence, and then leaned back and waited for applause.

The Frenchman, not understanding, laughed again and took another drink.

The New Zealander lurched forward. You could not have offended him anyway. They are a positive people, always emphatic. This one rubber-slapped a forefinger on the table. He struck his jaw out.

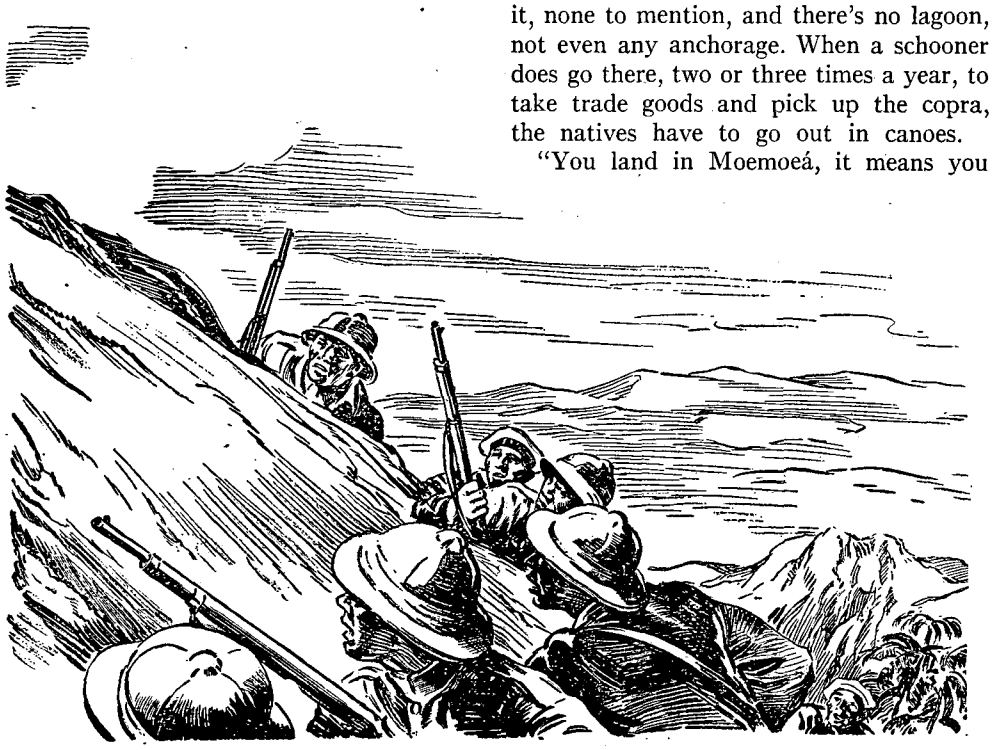
"And do you know *why?"* He glared; and the Frenchman, looking startled, blinked at him.

"Because it's the most remote place anywhere in this group, and that's saying a lot. I don't believe the colonial government half the time even knows Moemoeá exists. There's only three or four white people live there, and I'd be ready to bet every one of them's hiding out because of some trouble.

"Bora-Bora? Huahine? Practically like Tahiti or Raiatea nowadays. Even Mopelia: yachts put in there now and then and men go galumphing around snapping pictures.

"But Moemoeá's got no reef around it, none to mention, and there's no lagoon, not even any anchorage. When a schooner does go there, two or three times a year, to take trade goods and pick up the copra, the natives have to go out in canoes.

"You land in Moemoeá, it means you





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got guts. You've got to shoot the reef in one of those outriggers, and if you got pitched out it'd be just like diving head-first into a field of open razors. That coral's *sharp!*"

"Ah, *oui,*" murmured the Frenchman, trying to look polite. "*Mais absolument!*"

"That's why I say I'd make for Moemoeá if I'd killed somebody and wanted to hide out. You couldn't do better."

Fraser slipped quietly outside. He stepped into the shadow of a coconut tree and watched the door for a while. When he was sure he had not been followed he walked away.

Next morning, very early, he booked passage for Moemoeá.

THE name means "dream," in the pleasant sense, not a nightmare; and a dream island, at least in appearance, Moemoeá certainly is. Even as islands in that part of the world go, it is amazingly beautiful.

Once it was a volcano—volcanic activity indeed accounts for its very existence—and the crater, though cool now, shows clear and unmistakable from many miles out at sea.

It is a gigantic punchbowl, the slopes of which are green with palm and banana to a point about two-thirds the way up: after that they show the red-brown of volcanic rock, and the rim itself is serrated.

At one point, facing the northern shore of the island, a half-circle is missing from the rim. It is as if a careless servant had chipped the edge of the punchbowl.

There is not much to Moemoeá except this peak. The natives live on the collar of coral it wears, their pandanus and *niau* huts huddled as if in awe of the splendor above and behind them.

There are few beaches. Mostly the surf smashes itself in senseless but unpausing fury against a shore composed of jagged gray-brown masses of coral, spitting and hissing and hurling skyward in blow-hole columns and stiff bright flames of spray.

The only official representative of the French government, a huge amiable man named Tuu, was partly white, had spent more than a year in Tahiti, and could speak a certain amount of pidgin French. He was the gendarme, the sole keeper of law and order, which to be sure in Moemoeá ordinarily kept themselves.

He had a brown varnished sun helmet and he even had a uniform coat, though he had never worn shoes. He put the coat on when Fraser Chase arrived, and waded eagerly out to help the boatmen beach the tender. Fraser had come by a cutter hired in Raiatea.

"I watch you careful. You live here?"

Fraser, panting, his eyes still smarting from spray, stood with arms akimbo. Shiny affable Polynesian faces were everywhere.

"I think I might stick around a while," he answered slowly. "No *popaas* here?"

"Three, Monsieur. But they do not come outdoors when there is a boat."

"I see."

"You come along, Monsieur. Sleep in my house tonight. Tomorrow my sons they build you *niau* house."

"That'd be swell."

TUU as a matter of fact was much too polite and hospitable. In the presence of a white man he could practice his French and so show off before the island's population; and childlike, he loved it. He wouldn't let Fraser alone.

The other three *popaas*—Andres the silent vinegarish Dane; Armand the Frenchman, small, sour, suspicious; and the monstrously large and sullen Australian, Coffey—had been a disappointment to Tuu. They refused to talk with him except when conversation was unavoidable. They would not join in the *himenes*.

If they did not, like the occasional missionary, try to get you to do a lot of things you couldn't see any reason to, neither did they consent to do things which were clearly sensible and even admirable, such as sitting around talking, or singing, or strumming all day on a guitar, or having a feast.

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They minded their own business; and Tuu, who had never known what it was to mind his own business—no Polynesian knows that—simply could not understand them. This newcomer was different.

Or was he? Even the newcomer, to Tuu's dismay, soon proved himself unsociable. Fraser Chase looked good-natured: he was young and had an open face, an easy smile. But though there was never anything disaagreeable about him, he kept to himself.

He did not squat and pick his teeth and talk by the hour about any old thing or nothing at all. He didn't seem to care for singing, except perhaps at a distance, and he never attended a *himene.*

Tuu simply couldn't understand it. The *popaas* he'd seen and met while in Tahiti visiting relatives were never like this.

Indeed the white population of Moemoeá was not at all what you'd call friendly. Though from the first he had heard of them, Fraser had been living on the island for three days before he even saw one of his fellow westerners.

HE WAS walking along what passed for a beach, weaving in and out among upswooping shapeless coral rocks, sometimes on dry sand, sometimes almost up to his knees in water, when he came suddenly upon Jean-Senac Armand.

The Frenchman, a wizened twist of vindictiveness, with skinny limbs, with eyes habitually squinted and a mouth downturned in distrust, had been taking a dip. Bowlegged and almost hairless, he looked silly.

He wrapped a green *pareu* around his middle and glared at the intruder. Whatever the shape of his legs, there was nothing weak or wobbly about that stare. Here was an ugly customer.

Fraser said *bon jour* and passed on. Armand, growling something, scurried up toward his shack. Several hundred feet away Fraser glanced back. The Frenchman, a splash of color in his bright *pareu,* was motionless in the doorway of his hut —and staring after Fraser.

Fraser climbed up into the punchbowl. It was no easy task. The greater part of the rim was obviously unscalable, being no more than sheer rock; but the place where the "chip" was missing went as far down, almost, as the palm trees.

That morning Fraser had thought—the sun was bright in his eyes at the time—he had *thought* he saw, briefly, a human figure climb over the edge of the punchbowl at the lowest point of the rim. He had not seen that figure return.

He might have been mistaken. But it was worth investigating.

## II

WHAT had looked like nothing more than coconut trees and wild bananas proved, in its upper ranges at least, to be a tangle of nasty lantana bushes, tough, stubborn, unyielding, as formidable as that many masses of well-staked barbed wire.

There were natural paths wandering among these bushes, but the paths were aimless and constituted a maze. Fraser Chase stumbled about for a long while, swearing, before he found the one that led up to the rim.

The last fifty or sixty yards were bare and open, and they consisted of loose dirt and shards, making the footing treacherous. It was here he thought he had seen the climbing figure.

He moved slowly. Had he tried to go fast he would have started a small avalanche of stones and instead of making progress toward the crater would have slid further back down toward the sea.

Sometimes he even had to go on hands and knees. It was ticklish if not notably dangerous work. A good hard sneeze would have sent him tumbling.

When he reached the inside of the crater he saw that the climb had been worth while. Blocked off from the rest of the world by the walls of this ancient, now harmless volcano, the place was a miniature of heaven. No ugly lantanas grew here. There were not many palm trees, and those rather small, but the soil

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was richly red and wild tropical flowers were everywhere.

Standing perfectly still, he could hear the far thunder of surf on the shores below. It seemed an echo of the turmoil in another and less desirable world. Up here, there was no sound. The breeze tried vainly to reach the tops of the trees: the volcano's brim prevented this.

The garden was a paradise in itself, and had no responsibility to anything except the sky, which it gazed up at with the innocence of a baby. The clouds alone could see it, and at night the moon and stars.

It was, Fraser thought, a perfect haven of peace.

At this moment he heard somebody moving in the hibiscus bushes on his right a short distance up the slope. There were no wild animals in Moemoeá, no large birds. This could only have been a human being.

"Who's there?"

For a moment there was no answer, and Fraser stood shaking his head. Nonsense! It must have been his imagination. No one else was present. Why should anybody drag the ugly outer world into this bowered recess, this place of beauty and peace? Nevertheless he walked toward the spot.

Something came soaring out of the bushes. It was black, egg-shaped, and about the size of a large man's fist. It didn't splutter and no smoke came from it, but when it had rolled to his very feet Fraser Chase heard a faint hissing, and saw what the thing was, saw too that the pin was missing.

Time shrieked at him, poked his limbs, prodded his muscles; but he stood as if fastened in a vise or paralyzed, while the thing at his feet hissed on.

Hours? At least hours; or so it seemed. Later he was to realize that it had probably been less than half a second. He supposed himself smitten by panic; but in fact he must have moved mighty fast.

He scooped the thing up with two fingers, and threw it as far as he could. There was no time to grasp it, or to throw overhand. At the same instant he dropped flat on his face.

He not only heard the explosion: he felt it. The concussion was like something pushed against him from all sides, and it jolted him. After a while he looked up.

No smoke hung in the air, but the acrid odor of gunpowder was unmistakable. Hibiscus leaves only a few feet away were shredded. Wee steel fragments of the grenade had torn into the ground all around him.

He was too startled, and too sore, to be frightened. He knew now, as he ran toward the place the bomb had come from, in how very short a time all this had happened.

"Haven of peace, my eye!" he muttered as he ran.

BULL-in-china-shop fashion, forgetting all about the breathless beauty of this retreat, he tore through underbrush. Nobody was there. He glanced once over his shoulder. Whoever shared this crater with him could not, he believed, get out except by way of the chip, which, unprotected by shrubbery, was in sight.

But the chip was unoccupied; so Fraser plunged on, zigzagging, slapping down bushes with a stick he'd snatched from the ground.

He went all over the crater that way. He found nobody.

There must be, he reasoned, some other place of exit besides the chip, some place not easily found. He would have continued to look, had it not been for the threat of night. He carried no flashlight and did not even have a box of matches. So he quit his search.

At the foot of the slope leading up to the chip—a mere lump, breast-high—he kicked something which gleamed in the dying sunlight. It skittered over the lump and disappeared on the outside of the crater.

Fraser climbed to the top and saw it, stuck between two small stones about twenty feet down. It was not even near

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what was obviously the only safe avenue leading up into the chip. It was on a thin ledge, teetering precariously upon a cliff of brittle red volcanic rock almost vertical and affording practically no foothold.

Nevertheless—it was lighter out here than in the crater—Fraser went after it.

It took him almost twenty minutes to climb down those twenty-odd feet, and twice he thought he had lost his grip and would do a Catherine-wheel down the slope to a messy death on the coral below. He didn't. Somehow with feet and knees and fingers and elbows, and even with the heels of his hands, which soon were bleeding raw, he held on.

Eventually he got there. He picked the thing up. It was, as he had already seen, a cartridge.

But no ordinary cartridge. It was a rimless 7.63 mm. Mauser automatic pistol cartridge, a wickedly efficient little article carrying an eighty-five-grain bullet, having a pressure of up to thirty-thousand pounds, or more than twice that of an ordinary revolver cartridge, and capable in the right weapon of developing a muzzle velocity of about thirteen hundred and twenty-five foot-seconds—higher than that of any other pistol cartridge in the world.

Now what was a thing like that doing inside the crater of Moemoeá?

Fraser Chase was thoughtful when he inched to a place of safer footing and made his way down to the lantanas.

He passed Coffey's house, which was dark. He had not yet even seen Coffey, though Tuu had pointed out the house; but Fraser was convinced, whenever he passed, that he was being watched. This feeling tonight was stronger than ever. Three times he swung around, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Australian. He saw nothing.

All the same, he would have staked his life that somebody was spying on him.

By the shore he encountered Tuu. The big gendarme was just standing there thinking—or at any rate, he was standing there. He beamed when Fraser arrived. He almost exploded with excitement when Fraser actually asked a question.

"Tuu, does the government supply you with a gun?"

"*Mais oui,* monsieur, I got pistol! I show you?"

"Do you mind?"

Mind? Tuu mind? He was delighted. It was a wonderful thing to hold that wonderful weapon and have people gaze admiringly at him. He would have toted it all the time if it hadn't been so heavy. Now he fairly ran to his hut, to emerge a moment later bearing the object in question.

"Take it easy. It isn't loaded, is it?"

"*Oui,* it loaded! You want me to show you it shoot?"

"Well, no. Don't bother."

For Fraser's question had already been answered. The monstrous old 8 mm. Lebel the gendarme flourished so proudly—it looked as if it had been picked up by peasants after some battle of the Franco-Prussian War and kept in a damp place ever since—would be blown to bits by a cartridge of the sort Fraser had in his pocket, supposing that such a cartridge would fit it.

"I no use." Tuu sighed. "Never no crime here."

"That's very interesting," said Fraser. "I must remember that."

## III

ACCOMMODATIONS in Moemoeá were not sumptuous. The hut four or five of Tuu's sons had built for Fraser was typical: a structure consisting entirely of *niau* or coconut thatch, with no floor except a couple of moldy bamboo mats, no door at all, no windows.

Its only furniture was a rickety pallet covered by a mattress made of flour sacks negligently and most unevenly stuffed with kapok.

But then, Fraser had not expected anything reminiscent of the Ritz. He had not brought much—a toothbrush, shaving things, a few *pareus,* a large Tahitian

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sombrero, a French-English pocket dictionary, sunglasses, one or two other odds and ends.

All the same, there might have been some small object he'd overlooked, upon which his right initials, F. C., were stitched or stamped or painted. Those initials were not on his bag, a brand new and very cheap one he had bought hurriedly in San Francisco; for he was not using his right name here in the Society Islands.

He had his own reasons for this.

Like the other three white residents of Moemoeá, he preferred privacy. But privacy is a commodity not readily come by in that region, where the natives, the most amiable in the world, are at the same time the most inquisitive. Fraser, not from fear of theft but only as a precaution against that inquisitiveness, never left the hut without first making sure that his suitcase was locked. Also, he never went to bed without confirming this fact.

However, even if his house had had a door, he would not have made it fast. The Polynesians are not thieves. Indeed, on an island as small and as sparsely inhabited as Moemoeá, a man would be a fool to steal anything. What would he do with it? Where could he hide it?

It was for this reason that when Fraser Chase was awakened very late that night by the sound of somebody in his hut, he was not at all alarmed. He sat up.

"Who is it?"

There was no answer. He could see only the rectangle of moonlight framed by the doorway. This light was so bright that it made things inside the hut invisible.

But as Fraser's head cleared and the mists of sleep lifted, he remembered the sound he had heard, the sound which had awakened him. It had been that of the lock on his suitcase. Swearing, he rose from the pallet.

"Say, listen, you clowns! *Haere! Uá íte óe? Atira!* Scram, in other words! *Haere haávitiviti!* What do you think this place is, anyway? A—"

What stopped him was a hard and expertly delivered sock on the chin. He had no more expected such an attack than he had expected a submarine torpedo. It slammed him right back into a sitting position on the pallet, which *squee-eed* in fury.

It knocked him dizzy for a moment and rendered him foolish, reckless. Otherwise he would not have bounded to his feet again as quickly as he did. For with moonlight sprayed liberally upon him, he must have been visible to the other man, whom Fraser could not see at all.

In these circumstances it was not a remarkably sporty combat. Fraser, rising, took two more neatly-timed clips on the jaw. He slipped sideways. He hooked a left in the general direction from which the blows had come, and heard on *"oo-oof!"* as his fist sank into somebody's abdomen.

But immediately afterward something that felt like a lead pipe—which is to say, didn't feel at all—touched him over the right ear. He flopped ignominiously.

When he rose he knew instantly—it was the only thing he *did* know for a moment—that he was alone. He staggered to the doorway. He was obliged to cling to this for a moment before the world would slow up sufficiently to make it safe for him to step out.

Even then, even before the headache came, he had to fight nausea.

Naturally he didn't find anybody. Moemoeá was asleep. The man who had attacked him might have returned to any one of those dark silent huts, each looking almost exactly like each of the others; or he might be skulking among the banana trees, or down among the rocks that littered the beach; or perhaps crouching behind a shelter of immense taro leaves. Wherever he was, Fraser wasn't going to find him.

He staggered back to the hut, felt for and found matches, lighted them. His suitcase had been opened, yes. The articles it contained were so few that he could see promptly that several were not in the position in which he'd left them.

Yet nothing had been really disturbed, and certainly nothing had been stolen. An

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obvious effort had been made to leave everything as it was before.

A native? No, indeed. Fraser, remembering the words of the gendarme, "Never no crime," pursed his lips grimly, washed his aching head, took a couple of aspirin tablets, and went back to bed.

THREE days later the *Frankie and Johnny* appeared in the offing. She was an eighty-eight-footer, Dieseled, twin-screwed, three-masted, and despite her waggish name a very pretty bit of building.

She belonged to a young man named Ponslee, whose grandfather had made unforgivable sums of money out of Standard Oil.

Ponslee the Third, along with a couple of friends and four or five sailors, came ashore. They overturned just at that all-important moment before the keel grated, and of course they got wet, though thanks partly to the quick work of Tuu but chiefly to common ordinary good luck they were not hurt.

Cameras in hand, expensive cameras which had survived the splashing, they permitted Tuu to outfit them with *pareus*, and laughing they started to explore the island.

Fraser Chase did not show himself. Neither, he noticed, did Andres the Dane, Armand the Frenchman, or Fraser's burly shy neighbor Coffey, whom by this time Fraser had occasionally glimpsed.

The visitors walked clear around Moemoeá, and practically the entire native population, giggling, pointing, gawping, walked with or after them.

The multi-millionaire was a plump youth with the face of an unaccountably agitated cow. He bounced from place to place, his flesh wobbling. He talked pauselessly in a voice high and very animated. He should have been, you guessed, in charge of a harem in far Persia long ago; and his friends were like that too.

"No *popaas?* Say, this is real South Seas, eh?"

"Ah, *oui*, we have *popaas*," Tuu said.

Ponslee III was perhaps disappointed, but he remembered his manners, for he was a well-brought-up young man.

"We ought to call on them then. Where are they, Tuu?"

The gendarme of course was absurdly happy. With all his friends and relations watching him, he glowed; he expanded; he, for him, scintillated.

"One here." He pointed to Fraser's house. "*Américain.*"

"You don't say! An American, eh? Well—"

As the party started toward his door, Fraser Chase, watching through a chink, called in a low loud trembling voice, in English:

"I warn you to stay away! I have a bad case of leprosy!"

The yachtsmen turned like pieces of a single mechanism and ran back toward the beach. Tuu and his friends and relations were not able to understand it, nor, apparently, did Ponslee and his companions have enough French to make it clear.

Nevertheless, after a courage-summoning interval, and perhaps for the purpose of confirming or disproving Fraser's sepulchral statement, the yachtsmen started for Coffey's shack.

Fraser, peeking between the dried coconut fronds of which his own shack consisted, saw everything that followed.

Coffey, like Fraser himself a few minutes before, must have been engaged in spying on this party. As soon as it approached his door he appeared.

He was a huge man, six feet three or four inches, with an outthrust head, eyebrows so light they didn't seem to be there, waxy reddish-yellow freckles all over a face not in the least handsome, and an air of habitual belligerence.

"Well?"

Ponslee minced forward, his right arm extended, his left hand on his hip.

"Mr. Coffey? We were just sailing past and thought we might—"

"You should have kept on sailing past."

Coffey had his hands behind him. His face was deadly pale, despite the freckles,

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and shone with sweat. He spoke as if by a great effort.

Ponslee paused, dismayed. His two friends, chittering, paused behind him.

"I—I don't understand."

"You don't have to. It's just that I came here for privacy. I don't want any visitors. Please go away. Goodbye."

Still, Coffey did not turn his back to them but stood there towering and grim, until, in confusion and righteous anger, they had walked away. Then he went back into his hut; and Fraser Chase, peeking, saw what it was he had been holding behind his back all this while.

It was a long lean black shiny Mauser automatic.

AFFAIRS were quiet on Moemoeá after that for several weeks, until the government schooner came. *Then* all hell broke loose.

Meanwhile day after day lazed past; the sun was warm; the surf thundered among chunks of coral.

Frangipani and jasmine and fragrant tiare taporo bloomed lustily; the great gawky coconut trees, at once graceful and indescribably awkward, rattled their fronds fussily in the sun, like so many old maids preening themselves.

Tuu, nights, sometimes got out his guitar and strummed and hummed at the moon; and his friends and relations squatted around him and hummed an accompaniment; and sometimes too a girl danced. But the white men, except for occasional walk, less frequent swims, did not appear out of doors.

Until the government schooner came.

The average schooner operating out of Papeete is colorful, yes. It is picturesque—oh, very! It is also, sad to relate, about as dirty, crank-sided, slack-rigged and inefficient a craft as you could find anywhere in the world.

Habitually overloaded, it is invariably late; though which condition is the cause and which the effect nobody has ever been able to learn. Graceful as a washtub, and not much speedier, it is overrun with small hard black insects, and it stinks to high heaven.

The government boat is the exception. Freshly painted, lean, swift, for official use only, it shows glittering brass and sleek white sides.

Its sails are immaculate, its decks fairly shine, and indeed even its officers and crew are clean; the officers French, the sailors Polynesians who instead of being half naked are smart and spotless in the regular French navy uniform.

A pretty vessel, this. For the effect she created when portentously she hove to off Moemoeá, she might have been a dreadnaught.

The beach was crowded. The day was very warm and sunlight rainbowed the spray that hung forever a little above the shore.

*"Boo-oom!"*

Just a one-pounder, of course. Nothing but a signal gun. But why were they firing even that? Why had they come here? Fraser Chase peered out through a slit in the *niau,* and was careful to keep from appearing even for an instant in his doorless doorway.

He saw two small boats swung overside. Two! The seas were running light; but even so, shooting the reef at Moemoeá, in whatever weather, was no child's play.

Into one boat half-clambered, half-fell three officials in white drill copiously befrogged with gold. They were *popaas,* very stiff.

Into the second boat tumbled four khaki-and-red gendarmes from Tahiti, brave in their varnished topees and brass buttons.

The boats started in.

Fraser Chase did not wait for them. Nor did he show himself in the doorway—though it is questionable that any of the men in the two bounding boats had an instant to look his way.

*Niau* is papery stuff, mere woven coconut fronds well dried, and it is easily torn or forced aside with bare hands. Before the tenders from the government schooner had slithered across the sand between coral columns, Fraser Chase was wriggling

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through a back door of his own manufacture; and when the *fonctionnaires* and gendarmes, dizzy and breathless after the ride, looked around them and started to ask questions, Fraser was already climbing the steep lantana-stippled sides of Moemoeá.

He did not look right or left, nor did he look behind. He went as fast as he could.

## IV

AS HE scurried up the cleared space just beneath the lowest portion of the chip, dislodged stones rattled and clattered below him. He began to slide back. He moved slower, making less noise.

The sound was like the crack of a whip, close at hand, just above him, and loud. As he heard it he saw a stone about three inches from his left hand fly to pieces. The pieces were small and sharp, and several of them tore into his hand.

He did not stop climbing, but raised his head with a scowl.

"Hey! what's the idea?"

He saw the muzzle of the Mauser, he saw Coffey's face.

"Do I look like cops, you nut? Put that thing down!"

He scrambled up over the lip and rose to his feet, brushing his knees. Coffey stood there with the Mauser, its muzzle lowered now. He looked sheepish. At the same time he looked, as always, suspicious. He would raise that pistol again on any pretext.

Jean-Senac Armand stood on one side, watching. His pinched venomous face made him look as if he would gladly see both of them dead.

"Do you think you own the hideouts on this island, just because you got here first?"

"What are you doing here?" the Australian asked.

Though Fraser was of more than average height and weighed close to two hundred pounds, this man towered above him.

"Exactly the same thing you're doing here," Fraser flared. He glanced at Armand. "And you too, for that matter."

Armand bowed a little. His eyes were like vinegar. Coffey, a giant unaccustomed to having men talk back at him, glowered.

"I don't know who you are, but I think I'd better bung you down below again, Yankee."

"I think," retorted Fraser, who knew that a flicker of fear on his part, displayed, would be fatal, "that you couldn't do it if you tried, even with that cannon you cart around!"

"No?" Coffey, amazed, growing less excited and more honestly angry, with a stiff movement of his arm tossed the Mauser aside. It fell on the ground several feet away. Neither man even glanced at it.

Coffey's great hands were open, the fingers slightly crooked, and he moved slowly toward Fraser. "You think not, eh?"

Though big, he was not clumsy, as Fraser had at first supposed. On the contrary he was singularly light on his feet. When he got close enough he reached out with a long right arm, the hand still open, as if he meant to grab Fraser by the collar —then suddenly he dropped that arm; and his left, the fist clenched, shot out.

Fraser was not unprepared. The blow came faster than he had expected, but he rolled his head to it and slipped in close, clunking two hard hooks to the man's body. *"Oo-oof!"* he heard; and then as he backed away, pushing Coffey, something went *clack* over his right ear, and he swayed, gasping.

He had just sense enough left to fall forward, arms outstretched, to pinion Coffey's arms to his sides, and to hang on desperately, while Coffey walked him around, roughing him, kicking him, twisting knotty shoulders against the sides of his head.

"So it was you who visited me that night?" Fraser muttered.

HIS brain cleared. But he was going to be careful with this man from now on. He released Coffey's arms and suddenly sprang back.

Coffey, startled, charged. Fraser stepped in with a long jab that brought blood in a great red splash to the Australian's

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mouth; and then he stepped back. He slipped sideways, hooked one just under the ribs—and stepped back again. He danced out of reach.

The body was soft. He could tell that from the way Coffey reacted. The big man might have a couple of sledgehammer fists and a jaw like an anvil, but his belly was a weak spot. It hurt, when Fraser hit there.

Even now Coffey's face at the temples had a greenish tinge. But he was hot with rage and would not pause. Accustomed to winning his fights in the first few seconds, he could scarcely believe that Fraser still faced him. Snorting, both arms pistons, he came in.

Fraser retreated, but not swiftly enough. A left meant for his jaw caught him across the top of the head, a grazing blow but a stunner. He slumped to one knee.

He was up again almost immediately, but he could feel that there were bushes behind him now and he could retreat no further. He was still dizzy. He didn't think he could stand up to another rush.

"*Arrêtez!* Stop, or I shoot and kill you both!"

Panting, they fell back, each turning his head. Jean-Senac Armand had picked up the Mauser and was holding it like a man who knew how to use it—and who would not be afraid to do so.

"This is no time for *le boxe.*" He did not seem angry, only sour, disgusted. "While you battle, who knows how many gendarmes may climb the mountain? Look—Monsieur Andres here could have been a whole company."

It was the first time they were aware of the Dane. It was in fact the first time Fraser had ever seen the man, except at a distance. Andres was panting and his clothes were torn. Obviously he had just slipped through the chip, for he stared dumbfounded at this curious scene.

There was nothing Hamletish about Andres. He was short, though broad of shoulder and bulky with strength, and at first glance he had an open, handsome, cheery, somewhat birdlike face; clear blue honest eyes; a frank and straight mouth.

This was, remember, at first glance. He seemed then clean, fine, straightforward. Despite the tropical sun, he had a peaches-and-cream complexion, and his hair was vehemently blond.

When you looked again, and more closely, you saw that evil was smeared like an ointment over this man. No one in his right mind would trust the person behind those fine blue eyes. And that mouth, admirably shaped though it might have been from the point of view, say, of an artist, warned the most casual student of human nature to beware.

Here was not frankness, but malice. Here was one who hated his fellow men, who had no conscience, who could be stopped only by fear—and not often even by that.

Man of the world he was, too; and he soon recovered, in appearance at least, from his astonishment.

"It seems that we are all gathered here for the same purpose. I think there is no longer need for all this tiptoeing and these black looks, eh?"

UNEXPECTEDLY he fished a monocle out of a pocket of his torn slacks and fastened it into his left eye. He did not need to screw his face out of shape in order to hold it there: he did so without effort, as if used to it. Indeed the gesture seemed to the others perfectly natural.

"See here—" he started again.

"Pliss speak with slowness," Armand requested. "I do not understand well the Engleesh."

Andres switched into French without altering his tone or dropping a syllable, or indeed giving any other indication except this that he had even heard Armand speak.

"—let us be honest with one another. We did not run here at the first appearance of a government ship for nothing. One of us is being sought. Well—"

He shrugged. "It *could* be me. And I do not wish to be taken back to Denmark. I am no hero; but I tell you, gentlemen, I would rather die here and now, today, than spend the rest of my life in prison."

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Fraser Chase gave a tight unhappy grin.

"Where I come from they often get off," he confessed, "but I'm afraid there's too much on record against me. If I'm nabbed it means what we call the hot squat. You sit down, and there's a whirring sound, and you don't get up again—until the wardens lift you out of the chair. No, *I* certainly don't want to be pinched."

"Me," said the brooding Armand, "I care not for the public street in the early morning, and *flics*—cops, you Americans call them—forcing me to my knees and thrusting my neck down upon the *lunette*. That is what we call the little curved board, *messieurs*. Merry, is it not?

"And once your neck is there—*whee-ee-ee!* the *bascule* above, it is release', down comes the blade all weighted with mercury. *Non, merci!* Rather than meet such an end I will fight, here."

"You walk up a few steps in my country, up onto a platform," Coffey said. "They put a hood over your head and a rope around your neck, and then the floor disappears."

He shivered, looking at his feet. He swung toward Armand. "Let's have that gun back. One man could hold off a whole regiment here, for a while."

"There isn't a whole regiment coming." Andres had been peering over the edge. "There is only the advance guard."

Coffey cursed, snatching the Mauser. Followed by the others, he ran to the edge of the crater and stood beside Andres.

Tuu was toiling up the slope. He was for the moment utterly helpless. True, he was a magnificent brute in his khaki shorts and red-and-khaki uniform coat bunched from inside by strained muscles and discolored by great irregular splotches of sweat: he was probably as strong, if not as tall, as Coffey himself; but biceps are of little avail against bullets.

True too, he had that lumbrous relic, the Lebel service revolver in a holster at his side; but he couldn't possibly have drawn it, as he needed both hands not merely to climb but even to hold his position on the slope.

Indeed not only all of his body but his brain as well, such as that was, was devoted to the task of climbing to the bottom of the chip. As an invading force he was ludicrous. As a target he could scarcely be missed.

"He's got his uniform on! He's carrying his gun!"

"Don't shoot him," Fraser cried. "Can't you see he's alone?"

"Alone, hell! Look behind him there, lower down!"

Fraser looked, and saw that Tuu was alone only because, more used to this sort of thing, he had climbed faster than the others. Back among the lantanas were glimpsed the uniforms of Tahitian policemen and the more conspicuous uniforms of sailors from the government vessel.

The gendarmes no doubt had their revolvers, and Fraser could see that the *matelots* carried short rifles.

"Alone, eh?"

The Mauser was raised. This would be sheer slaughter. Tuu wasn't even looking up and would never know what hit him.

"Wait a minute! You can't do that!"

Fraser grabbed the Australian's arm and threw it high as the Mauser bellowed.

TUU looked up, mouth open, eyes bright with astonishment. The bullet must have *slee-ed* the air within inches of his head: those in the chip saw bits of bracken among the lantana behind him, clipped off, jitter crazily to earth.

"You bloody—"

Coffey tried to bring the gun down for a second shot, but Fraser, with both hands, held it high.

Tuu at last understood what was happening. He swiveled, in a shower of stones, and slid back to the protection of the lantanas.

No uniforms were visible there now. Every man of the following force, quicker-witted than Tuu, had fallen flat on his face. Looking down from the chip, the fugitives could see nothing to suggest that anybody had ever climbed this slope. The scene was as peaceful as that behind them.

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Coffey, snarling, ceased to struggle, and Fraser ceased to resist. The Mauser was lowered.

"Damn you, Yankee! Now you see what you've done?"

"I see that I've prevented you from murdering a friend of mine in cold blood. Personally I've had enough murder. I don't want any more of it."

"It was his life or ours!"

"No, it wasn't. You've scared him back. You don't see him climbing up here now, do you?"

"But he's still there!"

"All right. So are six or seven others. Are you going to be able to kill every one of them? Are you going to be able to kill all the soldiers they'll eventually bring from Tahiti?"

Coffey held the pistol flat on his palm and stared ruefully at it.

"Truth is, I've only got two cartridges left," he admitted. "Only had four when I came to the island, and I lost one last month, somehow, when I was up here looking over the ground."

There was some silence. Below, the lantanas were motionless and no uniform showed, but the men in the crater knew that they were being watched and soon would be rushed.

"Two bullets for an army," murmured Armand. He shrugged. "It is not enough, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Andres said, "*Attendez, messieurs.* I too examined this place soon after I came to the island, as no doubt each of you did, and I too decided that it was ideal for a last retreat, a last stand, eh?

"But I was not unprepared. I brought more than a single weapon. What I have hidden here is not enough for a very long and hard siege—ah, no! But it will give pause to those who lurk below."

Fraser's gaze said "So *you* were the one?"

Andres, his eyeglass glittering, bowed in answer precisely as if Fraser had asked this question aloud.

"Yes, it was I who threw that grenade. You will forgive me, I trust?"

"Well . . ."

"It was most foolish! You surprised me when I was checking my arms, and I—how do you say it?—I lost my head."

Fraser muttered, "I damn' near lost more than that!"

"I thought then that you might be a detective, here to arrest somebody, perhaps me. I thought that the island would be a better place without you, and that if you were killed here it was not likely your body would ever be found. So I threw the bomb, on impulse.

"But that was foolish, as I came to see immediately afterward. If you were indeed a detective, eventually you would be sought. Then we would be investigated, all of us here, and I at least could not stand investigation. So when you so adroitly threw the bomb away and were not hurt, I ran. I did not wish you to see me."

Fraser asked, "Where in the world did you go?"

"I will show you, *monsieur,* if you will accompany me." He bowed to Armand. "You also, perhaps? While Monsieur Coffey guards the post?"

## V

THE hiding place was ingenious, yet so simple that Fraser marveled that he had not seen it on his previous visit. It was right about where Andres must have stood when he threw the hand grenade.

A few rocks were moved; then a hibiscus bush was lifted aside, roots and all, as casually as if it were a piece of stage property.

And there was the hole, containing a walnut box which in turn contained three more hand grenades, a single-barreled Sjörgen auto-loading shotgun, two Ortgies .32 caliber automatics, and a considerable quantity of ammunition, all skillfully packed and in perfect condition.

"My first plan was to prepare against a siege if needed. I was going to bring food up here, and water. Then I saw that sooner or later, no matter how well supplied I was, I could be starved out. So I brought instead enough weapons to make a show

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of force, perhaps make the attackers think I had friends at my side. Then, while they paused, I would make my escape by another route."

Fraser cried, "*What* other route? How did you get out of this crater the other day?"

"It is my secret," Andres replied, "but I see no reason why I should not share it. We are all—how do you say it?—all in the same boat, eh? Come."

They were at a point in the crater almost opposite the chip. The sloping side was covered with foliage, and they were concealed as they climbed to the very lip. The drop, outside, was sheer.

They stood under a stunted banyan tree, leaning against its twisted grotesque roots, and peered down. The sight made Armand and Fraser a bit sick, and the Frenchman drew back, paling; but Andres was as insouciant as ever.

His monocle gleaming, his face bland, expressionless, he unwrapped a long rope-like parasite which was entwined among the banyan's roots. He dangled this, looped, over the edge of the cliff. It was green and shiny and slick to the touch; but it was periodically jointed, somewhat after the manner of bamboo, and these joints gave some grip.

"The experience is not pleasant, I can assure you. I have more than once dropped out of an aeroplane in a parachute, but that is as nothing compared with this. Observe that tiny ledge, far down, a little to the left, where the grass is? If you swing just right, your feet will reach that ledge. If not—"

He shrugged. "If not, you are crushed against the cliff. But if you do get to that ledge, it is not difficult to climb down the rest of the way."

Fraser cried, "You mean to tell me you've actually done this?"

"Twice, *monsieur*. The first time to make sure that it was possible, the second time in order that you should not find me. So I can promise that it is not impossible—at least for such as me or Monsieur Armand here. You of course, and surely Monsieur Coffey, are heavier. It might break with you. I do not know."

"I would never do it," Armand cried, backing away.

Andres shrugged.

"Remain then. For my part, I think we should go to Monsieur Coffey with those guns and make a great shooting among the bushes. Then we should return here and make this rope descent, one by one. Here on the windward side, while all the natives are on the other side, we could steal a canoe, pick some fruit, and make for another island."

"As to the guns—" Fraser had stepped back to where the box was hidden, and now he returned with it. "I told Coffey I'd had enough of murder, and I mean that. So before anybody gets any dangerous ideas—"

They had no chance to stop him. They could not believe that he was going to do what he did.


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He tossed the box and all its contents over the cliff.

For a long while they could hear weapons crashing and clacking far below; and when they leaned over, holding to the roots of the banyan, they could see them—the stock of the shotgun going one way, the barrel another, the bombs and pistols whirling in air, striking sparks where they hit, to disappear at last into green cover.

Andres' face was drawn tight and his mouth was a slash of rage, thin, bloodless, very hard. It was the first time Fraser had seen him display any emotion.

"You fool," he said, and it was as if he sucked the words in rather than spewed them out. "For that I shall—"

THE knife came from somewhere under his belt, and it came swiftly; but Fraser Chase was ready for it. Fraser kicked the man in the shins, and then, as Andres doubled over in pain, Fraser brought an uppercut to his chin.

Andres swayed, glassy-eyed, but he held onto the knife. Fraser slugged him again, twice; and the man went down.

Armand ran, screaming.

*"He's a detective! He must be a detective!"*

For a moment Fraser paused. He could have made his exit by the parasite-rope. But he did not yet have what he had come to Moemoeá to get. So he ran back toward the chip.

He heard a shot as he ran, and recognized it. That could only have been the Mauser. Either they were charging up the slope, or else Coffey had lost his head and wasted a precious bullet.

The Australian was turning as Fraser came, on Armand's heels. The Mauser was in his fist, and there was a breath of smoke at its muzzle. He looked panicky; he had a wild glint in his eyes; he was a cornered man, a man likely to do anything.

*"He's a detective!"*

"Oh, he is?" said Coffey, and brought down the Mauser.

If he hesitated, or retreated, Fraser Chase was lost. If he went ahead, it seemed, he wa slost too. So he went lunging ahead.

He left his feet in a long flying tackle, a football tackle, and his arms and right shoulder found Coffey's legs just above the knee at the very instant the Mauser cracked viciously above his head.

He even felt, or thought he felt, the hot gases from its muzzle. What happened to the bullet he never knew.

The two men went down together, arms and legs threshing. Coffey swore with feeling. Fraser was silent.

Rocking back and forth, neither willing to release the other, they teetered to the very brink of the chip. Now they were in sight of those below. Their first knowledge of this fact came in the form of a shower of stones and dirt near Fraser's face.

Fraser released his grip, staggering back. The loose dirt slid under him and he fell to his knees.

*"They're shooting at us! They—"*

But Coffey's rage had made him blind. He knew nothing in the world except that Fraser Chase was there before him, momentarily helpless. He had no other thought than to kill Fraser. Shrieking, he charged.

Suddenly he whirled around, facing down the slope. It was as if something had given his shoulder a tremendous push—which in fact was precisely what had happened. Mouth open, he blinked, not able to understand. He began to fall, stiff and straight. His feet did not move.

He paused for the flicker of an instant. Again he had been pushed by a bit of lead, this time on the breastbone, which was shattered. At an angle, he swayed, and such was the impact of the bullet that it offset gravity briefly.

Then, abruptly limp, he crashed. In a shower of dirt and swishing shards he tumbled over and over again until with a spitting, splintering sound he plunged into the lantanas.

FRASER got to his feet. Something tapped his shoulder—just touched the loose of the shirt there, as if in apologetic reminder. Something *zee-ed* past his face.

There was no time to shout explanations.

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He scrambled over the edge of the chip and rolled to safety.

Jean-Senac Armand was not in sight. Nobody was in sight. Fraser frowned, gazing skyward. After half a minute he started to run for the other side of the crater.

He saw Andres leaning against the banyan, and saw that the man was dizzy still from the beating Fraser had given him. He held the end of the long green natural rope. The monocle was fixed relentlessly in his eye, and though blood was forcing itself between his lips those lips were straight and firm. This man might have been a killer, but he had guts.

When he saw Fraser he smiled a little, and more blood squeezed out between his lips.

"Catch me, policeman," he said, and stepped off the edge.

Fraser ran to the banyan, grasped a root, leaned over.

On the ledge far below to the left, a ledge so slim that it seemed no more than a line drawn on the face of the cliff with a green wax crayon, stood Jean-Senac Armand. He had made the descent after all, the descent he said he would never make.

It must have taken great fear to impel him to summon so much courage. Now he stood, cringing against the wall of stone, catching his breath. When he looked up and saw Andres rocketing toward him at the end of the parasite, swinging wildly in midair, his legs kicking, Armand screamed.

Andres clung to the very end of the rope. It did not reach as far as the ledge. Only his feet reached that, and those only for an instant. In that instant, unless he could get his feet well planted on the ledge so that he could release the rope, he was lost.

And in that instant the terror-stricken Armand shoved him away.

Even Fraser Chase screamed at what followed. Andres must have known that he was as good as dead, that he did not have the strength to cling to the parasite even though he could avoid being smashed against the cliff and squashed to death like a swatted fly.

Perhaps his hands were slippery with sweat. More likely he deliberately opened them. He was like that.

Whichever it was, they saw him, the panicky murdering Frenchman below, the American above, suddenly leave the end of the rope and fly into space like a trapeze artist in a circus.

But there was nothing for Andres to catch, nor was any net spread below him. His knees up near his chin, so that his body made something of a ball, he turned around one and a half times, it seemed very slowly, like a thing sinking in water.

Once the sun fleered like an explosion upon his monocle, still firm in place.

Then he struck the top of a coconut palm and loosened his whole length, being no longer like a ball but like a dummy, a stuffed unbelievable figure without stiffening anywhere; and like this he plopped to earth and rolled over and over among bushes and boulders and trees, making a considerable noise even long after he had passed out of sight.

Jean-Senac Armand was sobbing with fear when he started to climb off the ledge, though in fact the climb down from that point was not difficult. He had not looked up and did not know of Fraser's presence.

Fraser hauled in the dangling parasite. He got a grip on its end, slimy still from the sweat of Andres' hands.

This would always have been hard to do. After what he had just seen, the deed tugged against every muscle of his body, and his heart pounded madly in protest.

Would the thing hold? He must outweigh Andres and Armand by at least twenty pounds. Would he be able to get any foothold on the ledge in that all-important instant when his feet touched, assuming that they *did* touch?

Well . . .

He closed his eyes and stepped over.

## VI

HE OPENED his eyes again with a snap. It was as if they had been clicked open by the force of the fall. Pain streamed

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through his chest and up through his throat until his head seemed an enormous thing so crammed that it was about to burst.

This seemed to take a long while. The rope jerked above him, so hard that his hands slipped a little and his arms were half torn from the sockets. Then he was hissing through space.

He saw the ledge coming. To land there would be like threading a needle while going a hundred miles an hour. It was ridiculous of him ever to suppose that he could do it.

Nonsense! He might as well let go now and get it over with. Why struggle? Why try, and miss?

It was over before he knew it had happened. His feet touched. He was slammed against the wall as he released the rope. The skin on his chin and nose was lacerated. His knees, his chest, thudded the rock violently.

But he was there. The rope was gone, and he was there. He could move around, provided he was careful. He drew a deep breath—it came haltingly and hot—and began to descend.

He overtook Armand in a junglelike growth near the foot of the mountain. The Frenchman was on his knees feverishly scraping a hole in the soft rich earth. When he saw Fraser coming he rose with the thin screech of a startled mouse, and ran.

It was not much of a chase. Armand realized very soon that he was going to be caught. To Fraser's astonishment he headed rather back up the mountain than toward the shore, quitting the close cover.

Fraser saw the purpose of this a moment later when they came into sight of the barrel of the shotgun and one of the Ortgies automatics. This far they had fallen. Armand must have passed them on his way down, and remembered them. Now he sprang for the automatic.

He scooped it up and whirled about as Fraser reached him. He pointed the pistol into Fraser's face and pulled the trigger.

There was not even a click.

"You're asking too much, after what it's been through," panted Fraser, and knocked him down and sat on him.

Fraser took out of the Frenchman's pocket a long thin bundle of bonds in a rubber-silk envelope. He examined these bonds, nodding.

"I knew you the moment I saw you, for all your pretense of not knowing English well. But we didn't have enough evidence to extradite you. Clarkson, your squealing partner, died a couple of months ago and the government's case went pretty flat. You didn't know that, of course, living out here.

"I figured you'd still have these bonds hidden somewhere near you. They were too hot to be shoved right away, but after a few years they ought to be worth a lot of money, and an old-time swindler like you would be too greedy to let go of them while there was any chance of cashing in.

"If I pinched you you'd keep your mouth shut and we wouldn't have a case. If I stuck around and made you think I was a fugitive too, I might catch you shifting the hiding place—or you might go to the hiding place in your excitement if there was ever any threat of investigation.

"When you risked your life just now, I knew there could only be one reason: you had them right on your person. Well, you're cooked now. On the basis of finding you in possession of these"—he slapped the bonds—"I can guarantee you a minimum of eight years.

"You ought to get more, you rat. You ought to get the chair. Come on."

ESTABLISHING his *bona fides* as an inspector of the U. S. Post Office Department was not easy, since it had to be done by means of the schooner's somewhat shaky wireless set in communication with Papeete; but at last this was accomplished, and Fraser dined with the captain.

"Actually I was thinking of doing something like that myself: I mean, getting word somehow to the Governor and asking him if he wouldn't send a detachment of cops to make a show, with the idea of scaring Armand into disclosing the hiding place," Fraser explained over an aperitif.

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"But that would have been a last resort. Will you tell me how it happens that you came here with all this fanfarade? I still don't get that part of it."

The *officier commandant* smiled.

"It is that we needed a little voyage, *monsieur,* to whip some new members of the crew into shape. And we did not know where to go. And some *fonctionnaire* discovered that very soon, with a few days, it would be the end of ten years of faithful service for Tuu, the gendarme here.

"So there was made out a document testifying to appreciation for his so-valuable work in keeping law and order on Moemoeá, and this was signed by *Monsieur le Gouverneur* and by *Monsieur le Commissaire de Police,* and each of them sent representatives to deliver this document to Tuu—representatives, you understand, *monsieur,* who also needed a little voyage, being bored in their offices.

"So we came. *Pourquoi pas?*"

"But then why did Tuu and the others come charging up the crater after us?"

"Because he wished to show the document to his friends the *popaas.* He wished to have all of you congratulate him in the presence of his friends and relations, some of whom had seen you climbing the mountain. That would be the greatest moment in his life! So he went after you.

"But the ceremony was not yet finished, you conceive, *monsieur.* Tuu, being ignorant, had run away too soon. This was not fitting. His excellency the Governor of French Oceania was formally represented, and matters should be done properly. It was not yet finished.

"So we dispatched gendarmes and sailors to overtake Tuu. They carried their weapons only because these were a necessary part of the ceremony. They never intended to climb a mountain.

"Tuu was too fast for them, and too excited to pay any attention to their shouts. They certainly never expected to encounter three fugitives from justice and a postal inspector from *les Etats Unis.*"

He shrugged. "*Mais naturellement,* when somebody started shooting at them, that was a—how do you say it?—a horse of a different color, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Of course Tuu finally got his document for keeps?"

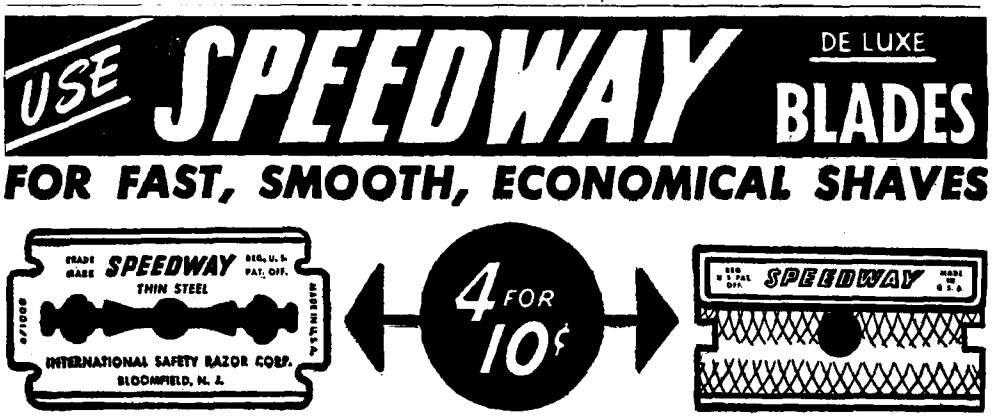
The commandant smiled again. He produced a wireless message.

"After the fighting was ended and the bodies of Monsieur Coffey and Monsieur Andres brought in, we received this from Papeete. It appears a mistake had been made. The date had been written wrong in one set of books, and when the *fonctionnaire* checked this, after we'd sailed, he learned that Tuu has in fact served only nine years and two months. So we were instructed not to deliver the document."

"I trust you ignored the order?"

"*Absolument.* We completed the ceremony as planned. Tuu will never know the difference, not being able to count that high, and nobody else will care. Will you have another *aperitif, monsieur?*"

"I don't mind if I do."

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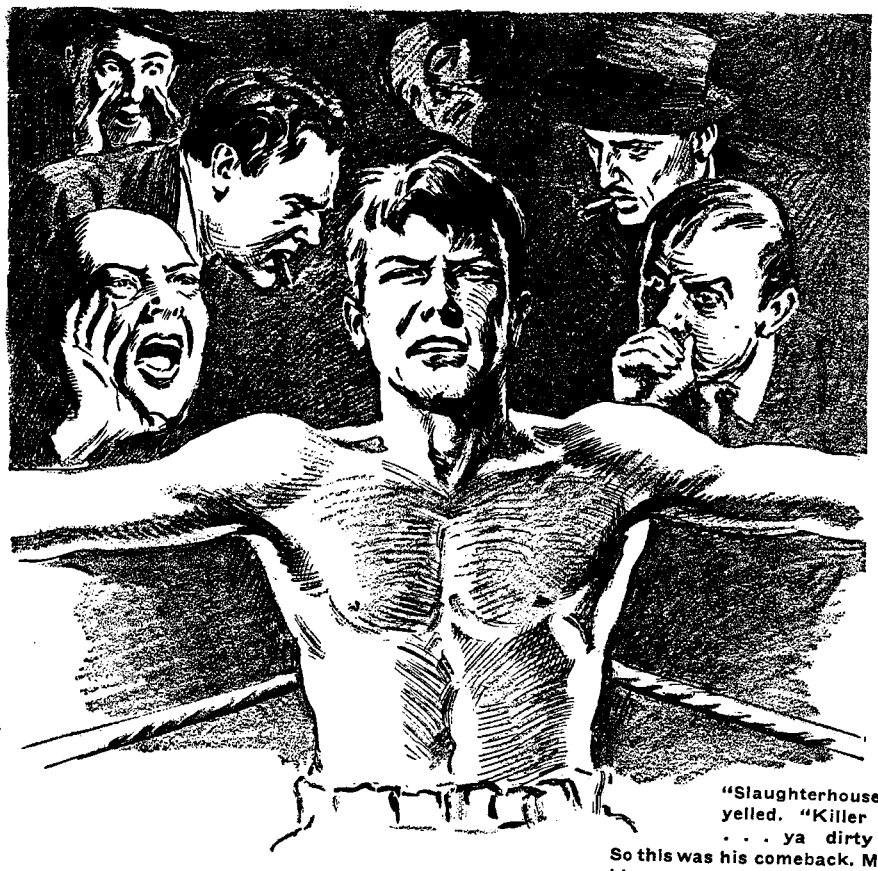

"Slaughterhouse!" they yelled. "Killer Moran . . . ya dirty con!" So this was his comeback. Mickey's blue eyes were tight with pain

# Killer Come Home

**No matter what the parole boards say, there's one thing a man can only work out for himself, with his fists. So thought Mickey Moran, forgetting what three years in lockstep can do to a fighter**

By H. DYSON CARTER

THE sixteen members of the parole board sat alert in their seats around the long table. Each head twisted, every pair of eyes stared at 7306, standing to attention at the end of the room.

This 7306 filled the crisp blue denim convict suit. His muscled shoulders and arms filled the clean jacket taut.

He was a huge man; but when the chairman beckoned, he walked from the end of the table around to the head seat with the flexing stride of a fencing master, springing at the ankles and weaving a little at the hips, without a trace of the convict shuffle.

The men at the table followed 7306 with their eyes, staring at his walk. 7306 stopped and looked down at the chairman's



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smile, his big square cropped head tipped down because of his height, but unbowed.

The chairman said, "Congratulations, Moran." He had more to say, the warning formula goodby - and - good - luck, but Moran's eyes stopped him. Frozen blue Irish eyes in a young Irish face that was flecked with tiny white ring scars and hard with defiance and loneliness.

"Thank you, Commissioner," Mickey Moran said, his voice low and sonorous, like a cello string plucked suddenly in an empty room, "thank you very much, sir. And all the members of the board."

There was uneasy tension around the table. The room's dank prison air was weighted with misgiving. Mickey Moran looked over the sixteen men and each pair of eyes fell away from his.

All but the chaplain's. The silvery-haired chaplain jumped up and led Mickey to the door.

He took one of Mickey's mighty brown fists in both his white hands. "Son," he whispered, "you go straight to that job. Don't you come back."

Mickey didn't look at the chaplain. His eyes were on the rivet-studded door and far beyond and he said, "No, Father, I won't come back. I don't know about the job, but I got something to attend to, and I won't come back."

He spoke quietly, without feeling.

The guard cranked his key. The door swung in. Mickey stepped out and the men around the table followed his enormous back, tapered like sculptured rock to the hips, as it carried away the white strip with the black numbers, 7306.

Behind the closed door the chaplain said, "I'd like to believe him. He has never admitted it."

A man in uniform grunted, "They called him Killer Moran; that was his ring name, even before he earned it by vicious murder."

The chaplain's eyes lighted up. "Mickey was unbeaten," he murmured. He sat back in the chair and looked at his own thin hands and his face warmed with a quiet smile that was bolder than a prayer.

MICKEY showered and dressed in the tailored suit ready for him and shook a dozen hands. His eyes were wet. The thin roll of bills the accountant handed him he gave back for the boys, keeping only the State's ten dollars.

Then he had to sit and wait in the office, his hands and his neck sweating with impatience, while his mind spun dizzily back through the years. The world was so near to him now that panic strangled his breath.

He was going back to his friends. And there were only two who had written him: Pop Hooley and his black-haired daughter, Rose.

The three years were gone. Somewhere a roped square of canvas waited for Mickey Moran. The bell and the hot lights and the pulsing roar. He heard his name roar down from the mob—*Killer Moran*—and he shuddered.

He saw the contender, Nate Korsak, his dark face sneering hate and fear, on that last morning in the hotel when they had signed on for the fight that had never come.

Mickey writhed away from that last morning, but it seared like a floodlight across his brain. Amby, Korsak's manager, had been strangely ill at ease.

Mickey cherished that memory. How Amby's darting red eyes had watched the little man who had died, the little stranger who had pecked all morning at Mickey's temper with sharp taunts and foul insults.

How Amby had looked at Nate Korsak, the look that had gone between them. How Amby had braced himself when the little man had tugged Mickey into the next room and slapped him full in the face.

After that, the morning was vague. But in the nights of his three years Mickey had pieced it together. He had said to the little man, "I don't know who you are, but for that I might knock you into Kingdom Come!" It had been funny, for the little man's derby had bobbed no higher than Mickey's vest buttons.

It hadn't been funny for more than a second. A fist had swung down, a power-house drive, squarely on the little man's

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jaw. Then Nate Korsak had shouted, had thrown his arms around Mickey to drag him away, and the room had filled with pale and frightened faces looking down at the little man, whose neck was broken.

"I didn't hit him," Mickey had said, telling them of the other fist, Korsak's hairy murder hand, swinging down from behind. "I didn't hit him . . ." to the doc and the police and the solemn jurymen.

Always they had murmured, "Killer Moran!" Graybeard psychologists had explained the other fist with words like hallucination and split personality.

So it had come from the jury as manslaughter. Five years paroled in three.

Mickey sat sweating on the office bench and whispered, "Littleboy, that was his name"—the name of the scared black boy who had been their witness. Amby's witness, planted in the next room that morning at the hotel. Korsak's witness.

Nate Korsak, who had been riding up for the champ and feared Killer Moran's dynamite. . . .

"ALL right Moran, here we go!" Mickey got up. He strode through the last barred gate into the vaulted hallway. Sunlight and fresh wind streamed in his face.

A big man yelled and grabbed him by the shoulders and it was Pop Hooley. They hugged each other. All Pop could choke out in his brogue was, "Boy, boy, 'tis our day, Mickey!"

Pop Hooley had been the cop on the beat far back into Mickey's orphaned boyhood. In his boarding house Pop had all the silver cups of the police heavyweight battles for six years. He was a kid's cop, a red-cheeked Irish flatfoot with mighty fists and a father's heart.

Pop Hooley had never moved up in the force, because of a certain failure to cooperate back in the dark years when mobmen roamed the city. That was all right with Pop because he loved Rose and the ring and his beat. Now he had his pension.

On the bus Mickey told him, "I been working in the foundry two years. Feel my arms and legs." Pop felt, and he whistled, and his jaw muscles rolled.

"Mickey, you might do it," Pop said. "We could go back to the start o' the road. You could beat your way up to Nate Korsak and hammer his dirty heart out!" Pop rubbed a coatsleeve on his breast, polishing the shield that was no longer there, and hope glinted bright in his eyes.

. . . All afternoon Mickey paced the two neat boarding-house rooms, breathing in the clean smells of freedom and listening to the little sounds of a house.

At suppertime Rose Hooley came home from the library. Pop hadn't told her. She stood in the doorway, the color swept out of her lovely face, and she opened her young arms and whispered, "Mickey Moran, you've come home!" He knew he was home when he kissed her hair.

Rose was the sweetheart of all his memories; her beauty and her gay heart and her quiet dignity were the deep wells of his ambition. She had stood by at playground fights and cheered from school ringsides. Her faith had lifted him all the way out of prelims, up the trail to the big time.

And on the day of his ruin she had given him her brave lips to kiss, and her promise, to save his heart from raging hate.

The three years were gone and they made supper on the tiny stove; they set the table, moving close and touching one another, but with very little said.

Mickey told them of the job the chaplain had fixed for him. A safe job in a truck on the road, eating in tank towns where no one would remember Mickey Moran called the Killer, the black-haired Irish hope, the handsome young mick who had blasted a row of twelve kayos on his way up to the contender, and then had tried to pin murder on the man he was matched to fight.

Then Mickey told Pop Hooley and Rose that he had another job for his hands. They nodded.

"There will be two fights," Rose told him, "always two. The hardest one will not be inside the ropes. But you will never

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be free until you have won them both, Mickey."

He knew then that his own strength was of one kind, and the courage of this girl another, and he would need more than havoc in his fists to pick up the wreckage of his life and build again.

Rose had promised, and Rose would go with him, up or down. She had no craving to read his name in headlines, for that can be done as well by murder as by fame.

But a man writes his triumph in his own heart; the triumph or the shame is there for a woman to read, and Mickey knew this. He had the three years behind him and they were dead years and now he was back at the start of the road.

ORK WILSON, the wiry little captain of the sports crew at the *Herald,* bit hard on his pipe and shook Mickey's hand. "Well, Mickey," Ork Wilson greeted him, "I am a glad guy."

He hooked Mickey in the ribs and tipped back in his chair and listened speculatively. He let Mickey finish and said, "I think you can do it. But how, I don't know. The commission will refuse you a license. Public opinion, Mickey. And you're three years off the canvas. Who'd book you?"

Mickey leaned close. "You got the answers yourself, Ork. Give Pop a hand and he'll pull me a license. Give me a column and I'll be Killer Moran in a new way. A way that'd fill the Garden up to the rafters, Ork."

Ork knocked the feathery ash from his pipe. "The *Herald's* not in the promoting racket, Mickey. And you are one long way from the Garden."

"Say it all, Ork. I'm a con. I'm free, but I'm a killer. Too dirty for the clean ring. Well, get this: I was framed and I'll prove it and I'll prove it inside the ropes. I'll pound the truth out of Nate Korsak's guts and the mob'll pay to see me do it."

"Get yourself a job, Mickey. You got a lot of fresh air to catch up on."

"I'm three years soft, eh? Listen, Ork. I didn't sit that stretch out on my bunk. I been in the foundry. Maybe the mob'll see a number on my back. Okay. The number I got there is Korsak's number. I'll engrave it on his beard. And you get all the stories, Ork. They will be good stories."

Ork Wilson shuffled papers and stuffed his pipe. "I'm not running the Lonesome Hearts column, Mickey. A hell of a grudge doesn't make a comeback in my book."

"Leave the comeback to me," Mickey growled. "I'm asking you to back Pop Hooley for my license."

Ork squinted through a tuft of smoke. "What'd you really come here for, Moran?"

Mickey got up. "I want to know where this Littleboy is. I want to talk to the black boy who said he saw me do that killing."

"Get out of here," Ork advised coldly. "That is amateur stuff. Very unhealthy for a guy on parole."

Mickey whipped up his hat. "Thanks, anyway, Ork. Someday I'll find Littleboy if I have to pick Harlem apart from the curb up."

HE WENT down to the street and automatically fell in step with people ahead of him, and the slimy habit ran up and down his nerves like a wet snake under his shirt.

He pressed against the rough concrete of a building and steadied himself. The crowds scared him a little. He pushed into them and trotted the miles out to Pop's boarding house.

Pop looked at him and said, "Never you mind, boy. I'll see the commission meself." Mickey told him Ork would help with that, all right.

Pop read it in Mickey's frozen blue eyes, the other fear. The old cop rubbed where his shield had been and fingered a phantom nightstick, measuring Nate Korsak's bullet head for no love tap.

Pop worked fast. Ork Wilson had the commission take a look at Mickey slamming hot rhythm out of the bag in a pool hall gym, and the license came through with some ifs and buts. All Pop said about

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this was, "I'm managin' you, Mickey Moran."

In two weeks he had one lined up. "The joint is under the bottom, the take is a lousy hundred, and the bum is the Hobo King."

Mickey yelped. "The Hobo! He's gettin' gray. I can lullaby him in the first."

"But you won't," Pop advised. "It's goin' a full five, and if you leave him stand for eight or nine, nobody is likely to get sore at you."

"Would I hurt my granddad?"

MICKEY shaped up at his workouts. For three years he had heaved a ladle in the foundry, right-handed and left-handed. His right and his left were steam hammers. His body was ribbed granite.

Everything the third-rate sparring slobs handed out poured off him, and when he handed it out it was all over.

Only his legs fooled him. He had kept them elastic but they walked him back and forth in steps, always in even paces. A sidestep threw him out of balance and he danced like a clockwork doll.

"You don't need footwork for the Hobo," Pop said.

This Hobo King had lived out a couple of managers, and sometimes a fond crowd went to see his stunt inside the ropes, as people listen to the old songs. He ran a sweat school for fat men. His pupils came and maybe a thousand curious fans who remembered Killer Moran.

They began to razz the roof off the musty palace very early, before Mickey climbed up; and when they got a look at the two of them under the lights the outraged howls leaked into the street.

Mickey went into it fast, walking after the Hobo, who waltzed around and served a few that Mickey rolled on the elbows. Mickey let him have a slow overhand right and to his amazement the Hobo wabbled and went down on one knee. The crowd didn't favor this abruptness.

"Slaughterhouse!"

"Killer Moran. . . . Where's ya striped suit, ya dirty con!"

The Hobo got up with a nice show of fortitude and Mickey let him clop through his defense. One of the hooks lifted Mickey's chin with a loud smack and the fans stood up to screech, "Kill the Killer!"

Mickey forgot the five rounds. The way the crowd yowled his old name was a whip on his raw pride. He was a fighter and he had never learned the exhibition trade and he walked in past a feint to cross a long right over the Hobo's left lead.

The Hobo spun on one heel, bouncing on the ropes, and sagged to the canvas. The bell whanged. But the Hobo slumbered on, and it was over.

The raging customers piled down to the ringside in a small riot. The referee got out quickly and there was Mickey and Pop facing the mob, both of them sick at heart, listening to the catcalls. But Killer Moran looked very willing to deal with any comers, by the half dozen.

Interest waned. Cops came down two aisles and Mickey carried the Hobo out and dumped him in a dressing room.

Pop said, "Don't think I am sore, boy. That Hobo probably couldn't sit up straight for five rounds. All this is my fault; such a pushover."

Mickey's blue eyes were tight with pain. "No, Pop," he said. "I lost my temper. And that's the way it'll be from now on. Nobody likes a convict makin' his comeback." His fists bulged. "I can't listen to them calling me a con, a killer."

Outside, in the cool night on the shadowy street, Mickey said, "I was the Irish hope, Pop. They called me Killer Moran then, and everybody liked it."

Mickey's heart was very full. Pop whistled a little tune on the way home. "There will be a bigger crowd in the Garden, Mickey," he said softly. "They will hate you until you put Korsak in dreamland. Tonight was nothing at all, boy, just the beginning."

MICKEY stopped outside the boarding house. He knew that Rose was waiting for them and that his eyes would give him away.

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All her strong hope she had written into her letters for three years, and Mickey didn't want to hear her say these things with her warm voice, comforting him.

He had started up a ladder for Nate Korsak, and the first rung had snapped under him. His youth and strength and freedom were a hateful mockery.

"Give me five bucks, Pop," he said. "I would like my first game of pool in a long time. You tell Rose how I laid the great Hobo low in one round, a story which would not sound very good coming from me."

Pop peeled off a bill. "Here's ten, Mickey," he said thoughtfully. "Have an evening with the boys. Up at Pete's place the boys will be glad to see you."

But Mickey did not head for Pete's. He was full of an idea he didn't like, a wild idea. He hastened to take it up before his common sense killed it.

At the corner he phoned the hotel where Korsak's manager, Amby, had lived. Amby had moved. The new address was in the higher brackets, a very nice spot, and a silk-throated operator put Mickey on to the room.

"No," a discreet voice said, "Amby ain't in. Who's that?"

Mickey juggled his idea fast. "Listen," he said hoarsely, "get this and don't stop me. There's a darky here, Littleboy, and he's plenty sick and talkin'. The doc's gonna take him to the hospital."

The voice sucked in its breath. "That you, Minty? Whyn't you say so! I'll get hold of Amby and don't move Littleboy till he says."

"Don't move him from where?"

"From Lowdale, you rumhead. Get a hand on yourself and keep Littleboy. We'll be out."

Mickey's pulse echoed in his ears. The idea filled his brain and he ran to Pete's and found one of the boys with a car, Cal Roter, and someone else knew that Lowdale was a pony farm Korsak had bought with the cash he took for standing twelve rounds with the champion.

"Forty-two miles?" Cal Roter grinned. "Sure, Mickey. I am handy with the wheel after my beer and I have had my beer."

Mickey prayed the state cops wouldn't pick up Cal Roter's weaving tail lights. Beyond that, he couldn't think. Maybe Nate Korsak would be at Lowdale.

Mickey felt the steel haymakers wind up in his arms, the concrete roll down his back and settle into rock, and his big hands yearned. He had his three years in each fist and he would ride them into Korsak, just under the eyes.

LOWDALE was a little cluster of light down a dirt trail off the highway, a barn and two shacks under a hill in the darkness. Mickey told Cal Roter to stay in the car, and he took a running broad-jump over the gate.

In the shadows someone stopped tinkling a guitar. A little ferret-eyed jockey popped up and said, "Who the—"

"Where's Minty?"

Minty himself obliged. He was a vast blob filling the door-frame of the nearest shack and he took a good look at Mickey and yelled, "Hey, you guys."

There were two more of them. They were all Nate Korsak's solid punching bags, with small round heads, and one of them carried a bottle in an expert way. They came down the steps bunched together.

Mickey blinked and instinctively tucked in his chin. He did not relish mixing it in the shadows with this jungle trio. Thought of his parole flicked a worry over his mind.

But it was a little late in the evening, he could see. He said to Minty, "You gorillas better get back in the trees. I am not a kind guy to certain animals."

This pained all three of them and with assorted noises they closed in on Mickey. The john with the bottle swung it down on the end of a very long arm.

Mickey dropped ahead of it and wrapped his clammy fear up in his hot right fist and hooked the bottle arm at the elbow. It bent the wrong way with a nauseating crack and a splitting scream from its owner.

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Minty grunted forward next. Mickey sent him a fast one-two for his low ribs and he soared back on the barb-wire fence.

The last man had retrieved the bottle. He moved in with this, broken end first. Mickey felt in the dirt with his toe and bent down to grab what was there and it was a horse shoe.

He came up under the bottle, and in the same sweep he let the horse shoe caress the pug at the top of his flat nose. The pug let go the bottle and grabbed frantically to hold his eyes in.

Mickey was already happy and he was overjoyed to meet Minty coming back from the fence. He feinted two, and then exploded a boilermaker left in Minty's midriff. There was a sound like an old tire expiring. Mickey looked around him and it was pleasant to see Nate Korsak's proxies all resting on the turf.

The eternity of three prison years welled up in Mickey's throat, the years of his helpless, caged strength, the thousand sleepless nights of dreaming hatred and a just vengeance, and he stood for a few seconds on a bright hilltop of victory with a wild trumpet sounding pride in his soul.

The little jockey came squinting into the doorway's light and said, "I am not next because I run very well."

Mickey grinned. His mind circled and landed abruptly. "You got a stable hand by name of Littleboy here?"

They found him in the hay on the bottom of a wagon, and Littleboy was very anxious to leave. But the sight of Mickey's face paralyzed him. "Ah knowed you'd come!" he moaned. The jockey brought him a drink and that helped.

"Littleboy," Mickey said, very steady now, "I want you to come with me. We got business, Littleboy. I'll see nobody hurts you."

Littleboy stood up and dusted himself off. "This bin comin' to me a long time," he said quietly. He walked to the car with Mickey and climbed in the back.

Cal Roter was on the runningboard, very sick from watching the performance, but he straightened up. As he turned the car around the glare of headlights shot off the highway and up the trail. The lights rocked toward them.

MICKEY shoved Littleboy down on the floor and got out himself. Tires scrabbled in the dust and a pale yellow coupe blocked the road. The driver had a gun over the the window.

Mickey laughed. "Is that you, Amby?" He saw the remembered bloodshot eyes in the squash face beside the driver. "You are much fatter, Amby. I came out here to see Nate, but your boys chased me off."

Amby clambered out behind his gunman. "This time you should be getting it yourself, Moran. It is self defense."

"There come the cops," Mickey snapped. The gunman flinched and Mickey's boot sent the gun high over the car into the ditch.

This piece of luck was altogether sufficient for Mickey, who found his hands wet and his legs unsteady. "Give me the keys of your car, Amby," he murmured; and with these in his pocket he gave Nate Korsak's manager two open-handed slaps on the jowls.

"Mickey," Amby croaked, "this won't do you any good!"

Mickey wanted to get away but he stayed long enough to tell Amby, "That three years didn't do me any good, you garbage. You will be hearing from me. I have a better mouthpiece this time, and he is called the D.A."

Amby's eyes glittered sideways at his henchman, who was busy consoling his wrist. Mickey said, "I am also getting that fight with Korsak."

Amby laughed unpleasantly. "What, Mickey? So soon after the Hobo King?"

Mickey had a great desire to take the heads of Amby and his gunman and split them together. But he heard sounds of life back in the yard. He gave Amby and the gunman one hook each to the nostrils and jumped in the car.

Cal Roter swung it down the slope of the ditch, around the yellow coupe and away.

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POP HOOLEY took charge of Littleboy. "You came of your own free will?" he asked. He was aroused, but he hid this in formal police style: "Sit down, Littleboy. Rose, pull down the blinds and get me a writing pad."

There was the glint of battle in Pop's eyes and Mickey was very proud to feel Rose's hand on his arm, trembling a little. She whispered, "That's him! Mickey, boy, how did you get him?"

"Maybe I kidnaped him," Mickey said uneasily.

Pop wrote as Littleboy's soft voice dictated. There was only the rasp of the pen and the low drawl, but the words prickled Mickey's scalp.

Littleboy didn't know much about the morning in the hotel three years ago. He did know that he had not seen the murder blow. Yes, Amby had paid him to witness. The money was for Littleboy's father, in a hospital.

Then he got the job at Lowdale, where he had stayed ever since. Minty always went with him when he took a trip to town.

"You were put in that room, to wait?" Pop returned to the beginning.

"Yes, sir."

"Something was going to happen?"

"Mist' Amby tole me so. Ah had to watch."

"Watch what? A killing?"

"No, no. A fight, that's all, he said."

Pop got it all down and made Littleboy write a few lines himself and sign each page. Then Pop said, "All they wanted was Korsak to lay the fellow out; pin it on you, Mickey, and get your license canceled. The killing worked even better."

Pop got up and shouldered into his coat. "This has a lot of angles. Littleboy needs to be somewhere safe. So I am gettin' him booked tonight, under another name, and he will have some privacy and good food until I figure this out."

. . . Mickey and Rose were alone. He was a little afraid of the evening's work, and Rose drew his big head down with her strong and tender arms.

"Mickey, boy," she whispered. "Now you can forget the ring. You don't need to fight. Korsak will get his. You and I and Pop will move out somewhere when it's over."

She smiled, and her eyes promised.

Mickey looked away. He looked ahead and tasted the victory of the law over Korsak and it was like flabby prison meat. He couldn't see Nate Korsak counted out in a courtroom.

He had another vision, of pitiless lights, of a verdict roared by thirty thousand jurymen and retribution in his own hard fists.

It was a crazy hope, and stark fear mingled with it; but his blue Irish eyes were fiercely bright as he kissed the wave of Rose's hair.

It was the afternoon rush at the *Herald* and the typewriters tattooed the newsroom full of their racket, the copy boys flicked up paper slips from desk to desk and the floor hummed from the busy tomb of the presses far below.

Ork Wilson led Mickey and Pop through the forest of desks to a muffled office and there was Amby squatted in a chair.

Mickey looked around. Nate Korsak sneered with his thin mouth and his green eyes.

Amby led off. "No damn faked publicity gets this rumdum a fight with Nate," he announced.

"You can talk after a while," Ork Wilson advised, "outside. It is this way, Ambrose." Ork had clipped the rough edges off Mickey's own plan and he spread it precisely in a dry way. "Mr. Moran is willing to meet Mr. Korsak for fifteen rounds. Same terms as three years ago."

"Booboo," Amby said succinctly.

"Fine," Ork agreed. "In that case I am taking this envelope"—he showed a bulky paper inside his coat—"first to the typesetters upstairs and then around to the commission and then over to the District Attorney. It is a front-page story written by a colored boy."

Amby laughed his contempt. "Littleboy's got nothing."

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Ork Wilson knew that there was considerable truth in this; but he had won his interviews on many occasions, and he said, "Littleboy gave us some nice leads, Amby. We have these all tied up and the knots are around your neck."

Amby's red eyes stalled. He shifted his fat legs and snarled at Mickey, "Nate would lay you down like a brick. You been three years gettin' soggy in stir."

Mickey bristled. "You let me remember that. You pick a slab in the morgue for this yellow-hearted butcher of yours. I will carry him there in the basket myself."

Korsak growled at this but Amby shoved him down. "If we win?" he suggested to Ork Wilson. There was no answer, and he followed it up himself, "If we win, you hand those papers over to me."

Presently Mickey looked up at the watching faces and the meaning of the deal choked him. But he said, "I want that fight. So Ork brings the papers to the ring and if I lose Amby gets them and Pop, here, will see that Littleboy goes away."

Nate Korsak and Amby went out, vastly satisfied. Ork Wilson murmured, "The Irish are always crazy. But I like it. If I get this story it is going to look nice in the *Herald*. It will be worth holding the presses, that night."

Mickey stared out the window and visioned a square of canvas wherein he would battle Korsak and the shame of three years, for money and all his life to come.

He had kayoed the Hobo King and now he was facing the contender. He had asked for it and the asking had been very simple and now he had to take it.

POP had little handy cash and because the city viewed the match as a stunt set-up for Korsak there were no dollars coming in to train Mickey Moran. So Pop raised a fund among the old cops who were suckers for charity.

It was small money. It hired two decrepit punch blotters. Mickey trained with them in a leaky barn and the training was pretty bad.

Mickey was soon aware that his two years in the foundry hadn't been the ideal routine. He had the power, the piledriving steam in both hands, but all his form was slow motion. The springs he had pridefully tempered in his legs and feet quickly ran down in roadwork.

And he waddled after five minutes in the ring. His trainees danced in and out of his attack with disgusting ease. They couldn't damage him, but Korsak could if he ever found the barriers down.

Pop said, "We'll put more time on the footwork, Mickey." But the time was futile. It went rapidly through the weeks that were left.

"I'm a rusty hinge," Mickey said. "I got what'll stop Korsak in both fists, but I'll never get set to deliver it. You can hear me creak and I never was like this."

Mickey knew then what the prison had done to the lightning devastation of Killer Moran. The newspapers sent their boys out to the old barn and the boys looked on sadly and Ork Wilson was the only one who gave the fight a play. He thought Mickey would be glad of the bucks if the Garden was full, and the money would last a while after his fighting Irish heart was hammered out.

THE crowd reared up for a look at Killer Moran when he was still a brown-gloved dot in a green robe coming out of the dressing room. A long hoot rolled up in front of him, like a carpet of scorn, as he walked with Pop and the handlers.

Mickey's blue eyes were bleak on the ring ahead. The swift and ardent tenderness of Rose's embrace still tingled his arms, but the greeting of the customers whipped that away.

As he bent through the ropes the frenzied hate of the mob took him squarely in the face, and misery dried his skin, panic stabbed with the fear that on this canvas he would be battered out of his last hope for justice, and with it would go the love of Rose, and nothing he could do this night would save him.

Ork Wilson was in the press row and

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he might hand the envelope over to Amby now and save the time of a few rounds. The *Herald's* presses could start rolling now without Littleboy's story.

Mickey Moran the Killer looked into Amby's rodent eyes and the measuring, lustful grin of Nate Korsak, who knew all about Mickey's footwork and had a lengthy slaughter planned.

While the announcer spieled his jerky lines Mickey looked down under the lights and there was the champ in a gray suit. Four rows back Mickey saw the chaplain and the night guard from his old cell block.

"And a clean fight all the way," the referee finished. The bell sounded and Mickey stepped out.

Nate Korsak seemed a ponderous man, rugged as a boulder, and this bulk was deceptive. He flashed away from Mickey and back in. The hard clout took Mickey on the cheek and the Garden roared.

Mickey shook his head and fed Korsak a straight stiff right that echoed on the roof. They were both curious and they stood and hammered at each other's gloves and arms so that it sounded good.

The way Mickey had landed, it looked as if the dopesters had the odds a little too high: 7 to 1 for Korsak to drop the curtain in the fifth or before.

Korsak began his dance in the second session. With the rhythm of his steps he mingled joyful hooks. Mickey stopped what he could. The others came through and Korsak had destruction in his left.

The noisy barrage went back and forth with Mickey usually at the receiving end and the bell didn't silence the shrieked delight of the customers.

Mickey warmed up his arms. He tried playing Korsak low and the inevitable opening came upstairs and Mickey crossed a high right that was half an inch off center.

It was dynamite and all it did was warn Korsak. His pale green eyes signaled a change of attack as he rolled back on the ropes and wiped the blood out of his slit eyebrow.

The third and the fourth were cautious displays of Korsak's superb form. He stepped over Mickey's sluggish feet and belted him rights and went away and came back to belt him harder lefts.

Mickey absorbed most of this with no visible anguish, but when he rocked under a terrific left hammer to the head, and dark blood spattered down his chest, the ringside leaped to its feet. This was Killer Moran being carted to the guillotine.

Inspired by his public, Korsak lifted another one up from the rosin, and Mickey went down.

HE TURNED over and propped himself on a knee and listened to the howl of the mob, the hate and laughter engulfing him, and he grunted with the referee's "Seven!"

He grunted to his leaden feet and put his arms around Korsak and floundered him into the ropes. When the referee broke it up Mickey swung a few and Korsak was unable to take his measurements, much to the annoyance of the dopesters who were now due to lose bundles of cash with each round.

After the bell Mickey was on his stool and he heard Pop's brogue in his ear, "Save it up, boy; remember Fitzsimmons, he saved it up."

Mickey tried to remember what it was that Fitzsimmons had saved up. He waded out with the gong and Korsak unleashed a two-handed assault. Mickey's barricade was full of holes and he felt Korsak's vicious leather in his bruised mouth and over his heart.

He growled into Korsak's green eyes and suddenly it was different. Suddenly it was three years ago and there was a murderer with green eyes. . . .

Mickey was amazed to find his feet in the right places. He kept this strictly confidential and he began to flounder drunkenly and Korsak grinned with his thin lips. Korsak danced in and Mickey was not there but he had left word for Korsak in the shape of a haymaker swing to that grin.

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For some reason the noise of the customers emptied out of the foggy air. The telegraph clackering died down uncertainly.

Korsak was very careful with his dance now, and Mickey took his time saving it up, feeling very sure that he would never be able to use it, but saving it up all the same, and his eyes were bright Irish blue, laughing at Korsak the way the Irish laugh when they are being killed.

Then Mickey wondered if he was being killed at all. Korsak hammered him in the eyes and Mickey could still see.

He was still floundering on his heels in the seventh, and Korsak was unhappy, the silence of the crowd worrying him and between rounds there was Amby's sweating anxiety that chilled Korsak worse than Mickey's deathless stamina.

Mickey could see this and so he rocked a little in the seventh, and as Korsak eagerly lunged to the invitation Mickey added everything he had saved up in the Fitzsimmons manner and divided it between his right and his left, and he yanked open the steam valves and let the boilermakers go, one to the head and one to the beard.

Korsak received these pistons as delivered and sagged from his knees to his arms to his face, and he didn't roll over.

ALL MICKEY had left was his legs, and they got him to a neutral corner. He spun around, sagging on the post, and his heart counted with the referee's fateful strokes.

A wild exultation surged within him and rose to mingle in the howling tempest of the crowd. Nate Korsak's face stayed flat in the rosin.

The referee straightened and Pop hauled himself up the ropes and Mickey heard his hoarse triumphant brogue, "Boy, boy . . . 'tis our night, Mickey!"

He turned to grin stiffly at Pop, but he could not find any words to say.

The referee pulled him out and hoisted his arm. He felt himself turned on his legs to show the mob Mickey Moran's victory.

And there was a hush like a monstrous gasp, before the thunder came down again; and now it was a new fury, with *"Killer Moran!"*—an earthquake of frenzied cheering for a lost fighter redeemed with his fists. Mickey breathed it in and his heart came alive.

Police flooded the ring. They opened, and Mickey saw Nate Korsak handed down the steps. He looked out and saw Amby fighting wildly over seats, slashing his way to the exits, and Ork Wilson with his coat gone and his shirt ripped, waving a long envelope over his crazy schoolboy grin.

"We'll get you out, boy," Pop said, propping Mickey's huge shoulder over his own.

A red-faced little man crawled under the tangle of uniformed legs, dragging a microphone. "You gotta," he pleaded in a scream, "Moran, you gotta tell 'em . . . how it feels . . . Here, everybody, here's Killer Moran!"

Mickey cupped the microphone in his gloves. "Micky Moran talkin'," he said. "Maybe I won't fight the champ. I hadt' fight Korsak. I hadt' fight because—"

He struggled to put three years into a string of words and it wouldn't come and he remembered Ork Wilson with his envelope.

"Listen," he shouted, the words popping out of his memory, "for—for further details see your local newspaper!"

Then they went down to the dressing room, through the cheering crowd; and Mickey carried such an exultation that he could not feel his weariness.

They dried him after the lashing shower. They wrapped him in the green robe and stood him up and Rose came through the doorway into his arms. Everything had been said by the thundering crowd outside; they had nothing left to say.

But they held each other, and they knew that the three dead years were lost forever in the sweet freedom of life that had come back to them.

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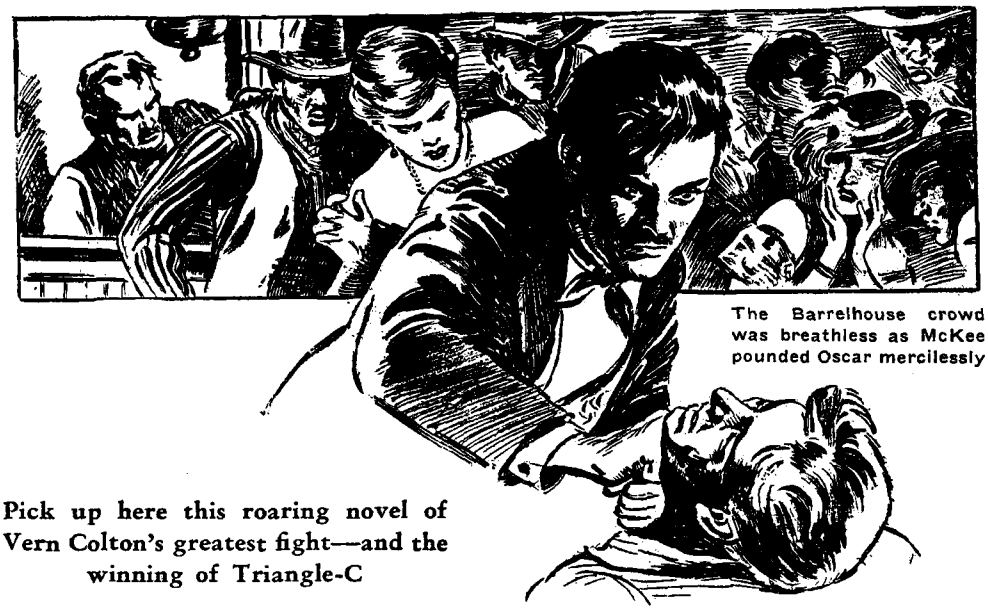
# Guns on Fire



The Barrelhouse crowd was breathless as McKee pounded Oscar mercilessly

**Pick up here this roaring novel of Vern Colton's greatest fight—and the winning of Triangle-C**

by JACK BYRNE

VERN COLTON, Texas lawman, has reluctantly turned in his badge to come up to the Blue Hills country in answer to a summons by his uncle

MATTHEW COLTON, shrewd old owner of the Triangle-C ranch. Matt wants him to take over the spread for a time and run it, but sidesteps telling him exactly what he is to do.

This much, however, old Matt divulges: a storm is brewing in Blue Rock County between the cattlemen, represented by the Cowman's Committee, and the nesters, who have been sent by the Pioneer Land Development Company to work land that is not particularly good for cultivation.

Matt Colton intends to keep his enormous ranch intact. He needs the services of a fast, accurate gun-hand; and to keep the job in the family is willing to pay Vern twenty dollars a day to take over.

VERN agrees, but with certain definite misgivings. Stubborn as his uncle, he resents the old man as a tight-fisted rascal, is unwilling to admit even to himself a kind of buried affection he has for the man.

And his nerves are on edge. Stopping in a saloon earlier in the day, he had engaged in a gunfight where his cold, fast action had saved the life of a fellow pilgrim, a fat man who introduced himself as JARNELL. Hard as steel in a fight, Vern suffers an inevitable reaction afterward, and can pull himself together only by copious amounts of whisky.

His return to the Triangle-C is not made any easier by the presence there of young MYRA WADDELL, who is looking after Matt Colton and acting as his secretary. Unhappily Vern remembers JENNY, the woman who had been his wife. When she left him for another man he had let his own spread go to blazes. And after that she had died in Albuquerque. Now his uncle taunts him for still remembering a faithless and worthless woman.

ON THE day following Vern's arrival, Matt takes him into Rapid City along with OSCAR, his huge faithful retainer and body-guard. They make the rounds, Matt introducing his nephew to various citizens, taking care to insult each in turn:

KENO MCKEE, proprietor of the Barrel-

**This story began in last week's Argosy**



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house Bar, whom Vern prods by attentions to his girl, STELLA.

FAITH LENNOX (daughter of MORT LENNOX, publisher of the Rapid City *Clarion*), who accuses Matt of enmity to the town in refusing to give the railroad a right of way through his land.

ADAM HARKNESS, president of the Central Bank, who is infuriated by Matt's accusations that he is letting the cattle men down.

WINK BEECHER, deputy sheriff, and CLAY UNGER, city marshal. Unger, stung by a remark of Vern Colton's tries to draw on him but is outfaced.

A LITTLE later, as he stands in front of the *Clarion* office talking to Faith Lennox, Vern sees a reflection in the glass that makes him whirl—just in time to miss a shot in the back. Shooting as he whirls, he kills BUCKY LANDREU, a friend of McKee, who has trailed Vern to Rapid City to avenge his brother Pat, whom Vern had turned over to the Arizona law for hanging.

Now, looking up the street, he sees another man raise a gun in his direction—but shoot over his head. From a window above him clatters a shotgun, followed by the body of Clay Unger; the marshal had been waiting there to blast him.

The man who has saved his life by shooting Unger is Jarnell, the fat pilgrim Vern had backed in a saloon brawl the day before. Jarnell, whom old Matt had pointed out a little while before as "one you'll have trouble with, the high gun of the land-grabbers' Protective Association." A potential enemy.

And now their scores are even. . .

## CHAPTER VII

### FIELD FOR BATTLE

SOME trick of memory made him repeat the phrase the fat man had used back in Hathaways. "I was a gone goose," he said. "I wouldn't have had a chance."

Jarnell shrugged. "I reckon that breaks us even, Colton."

They were crowding around the two from all directions, shouting questions. Big Oscar was among the first to appear, and Matthew Colton came pushing through the fringe of figures. He reached out a thin hand toward Vern, peering at him anxiously.

The solicitude faded from his eyes as he turned them to Jarnell.

"It was cold-blooded murder they tried!" he barked for everyone to hear. "Twenty can testify it was self-defense, pure and simple. Where's Wink Beecher? Where's the other half of Rapid City's crooked law?"

He surveyed Jarnell narrowly. "It looks like you two know each other. How come you to chip in?"

"Back-stabbing's not in my line," said the fat man. "Your nephew gave me a hand in a little ambush at Hathaways, the kind of thing they claim you like to arrange. Now we're even-stephen."

"Hah!" Matthew grunted. "I heard you'd gone from town to hire another bunch of thugs and gun-slingers in here, but stoppin' you from comin' back was no idea of mine. If a Triangle bullet kills you, Jarnell, you'll see the muzzle that fires it. You got the word I sent, didn't you?"

"About steering wide of the north strip? Yes, I heard about that. But the courts have said otherwise."

"Damn the courts!" Matthew snarled. "The Triangle will hold the north strip, come hell or high water, and I'm posting a bonus of a hundred dollars for the scalp of the first Association gunhawk who pokes his nose across the line."

"I was hired for a job of work," Jarnell said evenly. "I'm paid to follow orders, and I follow 'em as long as they're within the law."

His eyes met Vern's in an instant of understanding. Fate had chosen to link them strangely in a double bond, a life saved and a death spared for each, but that would not slow the draw of either man when their trails might cross again.

In a flash of memory Vern recalled the fat man's words on the evening of their meeting: "If I wasn't a fool, I'd turn tail for Kansas." But you couldn't turn tail—not when you'd been hired for a job of work.

He matched Jarnell's nod with one of his own, and abruptly turned away. The old tightness was constricting the pit of

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his stomach, and as he shouldered through the crowd he could read the message in the eyes that stared, the faces that turned towards him.

*Killer! Get out of his path!* That was what the faces said. And wherever he went those looks and whispers would follow him.

. . . He would have avoided Faith Lennox, but suddenly she was there in front of him. Her hand was reaching to touch his arm when he pulled back.

"I still can't believe it," she said. "They would have shot you down without a chance, and they might have murdered me as well. They say Clay Unger's riot gun would have riddled everything within ten feet."

He murmured something, mumbled words. There were lines of strain at the corners of her mouth, he saw, and her eyes were bright upon him. But beyond that he also saw that here was one who had no fear of him, who did not shun his path. In that instant he sensed a fellowship with this girl, an understanding such as he had with Jarnell.

"I owe you some thanks for knocking me down," she said. "That sounds queer, doesn't it? Will you come to see me when you can? As soon as you can?"

He nodded. Men drew back as he went on along the walk.

HE STOOD alone at the nearest bar, and drank. Three drinks. The others there pitched their voices to a lower key and gave him space, for they saw the wariness of his eyes and the concentrated alertness of him.

When Oscar looked in over the swing-doors, Vern pocketed a pint flask and joined the big man on the walk. The flurry in the street had subsided somewhat, but here and there the arguing groups still discussed the swift events.

"Dey carry dem fallers in," Oscar said. "De inquest mabbe tomorrow, mabbe nex' week. Mr. Matt says no trouble."

Vern could feel the tingling bite of the whisky. He said, "You don't cotton very much to me, do you, Oscar?"

The giant Norwegian looked down at him with narrowed glance. "Naw," he said. "I t'ink some time I wrap you around your ears, mabbe."

So ended the conversation.

Mr. Matthew waited them at the livery. He sat astride the buckskin like a cricket ready to hop. His seamed face was unreadable but his eyes retained their mocking glint as he watched Vern mount.

"You get your dose of rotgut soothin' syrup?"

"That's my business," Vern said.

"Hmmmm." Matthew kneed his horse into the street. "Well, we may as well head along. I aim to get an early start for Jefferson in the morning."

"You sure you couldn't find a couple more of your fights for me to handle while you're gone? You must have a few more enemies who could settle old grudges by drawin' a bead on me."

"Well," said Matthew, "as a matter of fact, there was one more little visit I aimed to make. I guess you can handle that by yourself, though."

Vern ignored the bait. They rode on to the end of the street and mounted the rise of land known as Sentinel Bluff. Matthew pointed across the town to the opposite bluffs where the Rapid River wound.

"I wanted to drop in on the folks at the Elcon Mines. Man named Ambler runs the office—a big, jolly, laughing fellow, just bustin' with jokes and good will."

"What have they got against you?"

"The Elcon? Why, not a thing. They got a low-grade proposition there that makes a little money every year. Trouble is, it costs too much to haul the ore by team and narrow gauge. The Elcon's behind this move to bring the railroad in."

"And you're blocking the right of way."

"Me and a few others," Matthew admitted. "We've set a pretty stiff price. But it wasn't Mr. Ambler I particularly wanted you to see. There's this first assistant of his, a blond, good-lookin' man, always dresses neat and gets around right handy with the ladies. He's been sparkin' up lately to Faith Lennox, I hear."

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Vern eyed him, shrugging. Matthew Colton was noted for his sly, dry way of beating around the bush, and the years had not changed him. But Vern would not give him the satisfaction of asking what he was driving at.

"I thought you might like to see this assistant," Matthew said. "He goes by the name of Dallas Gardwell."

Vern's lips pressed tight together and his jaws locked.

Dallas Gardwell was a name Vern never spoke, the face he never wanted to see. The ugliest dream of his life had been a meeting face to face with the man who had stolen Jenny's love and taken her away.

IN RAPID CITY a steady file of the curious trickled through the rear room of the barber shop where Clay Unger and Bucky Landreau were covered with the same blanket. On the streets men exchanged guarded glances and spoke in cautious voices.

It wouldn't be long. The fuse was lighted now, and sputtering.

In the Barrelhouse Bar, Keno McKee dealt solitaire while Stella watched the fall of the cards.

Banker Harkness sat in his office, writing a letter in a stiff, black hand.

Ben Jarnell came out of the headquarters of the Land Association, where six or eight hard-featured men loafed and smoked, in time to see Miss Faith Lennox go up the street on the arm of the assistant manager of the Elcon Mines.

Wink Beecher, dead drunk, had locked himself in one of the cells at the city jail.

While Vern Colton rode the wagon-road out of town.

He rode with Matthew beside him, with Oscar trailing in the buckboard, with the sun still two hours from the horizon's rim; and he heard nothing, felt nothing. All he saw was the steady bounce of the sorrel's ears straight ahead.

He rode in silence, and he did not know how long.

He turned to face his uncle, after many minutes had passed, and the jangle of his own thought did not let him see how pinched and gray Matthew Colton's face was.

"Is that why you wanted me here?"

"One reason, yes," said Matthew.

"I could have found him long ago if I wanted to," Vern said. "I could have killed him if that was what I wanted."

But he had never wanted that. He had no hatred for Dallas Gardwell, no feeling at all toward the man. This Gardwell loved Jenny, and Jenny loved him, and that was all there was. It didn't matter that Jenny had thought for a time that she loved Vern Colton, and married him.

No, Vern had figured it all out a long time ago. It wasn't Gardwell's fault. Jenny had wanted someone to take her away, and Gardwell just happened to be the man. He had no settlement to make, none at all, with Gardwell.

But just the same, he had never liked to think what might happen if he came to face the man. Not even now, with Jenny long since dead.

He said to his uncle, his voice harshly bitter, "Did you want me to ride back and shoot him down? Is that what you expected?"

"I had no such idea," said Matthew gravely.

"Then why did you bring me here? Why squirm and pussy-foot about telling me? What do you think I am?"

"I think you're a fool," Matthew said from the thickness of his throat. "I brought you here to make you a man again or to see you dead."

Vern expelled a slow breath, staring at him. The buckskin and the sorrel, pulled to a walk, moved sedately side by side.

"I want to kill the hold that Jenny's still got on you," Matthew went on. "I want to bring you back to the place in life where you belong.

"Lord, boy, can't you see what you've done to yourself? Because a flittery, flirty hussy of a thing walks out on you, must it wreck you forever?

"You let your little place run to seed, and that was all right. You were hit hard, and nobody blamed you. Any man has a

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right to get drunk, but no decent man becomes a drunkard."

The hurt and anger deepened in Vern's eyes.

"Wait," said Matthew quickly. "I don't mean whisky. It's mock heroics you're drunk on, boy. Some fools enlist in armies, kill themselves in wars, to forget their broken hearts.

"*Paah!* They're not heroes; they're cowards. If they were men, they'd face the hard facts. But instead they run off to enlist in the sheep wars, or take a deputy's badge, or go bounty hunting, so the world will see how brave they are, and how much they loved, and how deeply they suffer.

"And I put the name to them that I put to you, my brother's son. You're not the lobo wolf you think, Vern Colton. You're a yellow dog!"

Vern saw the terrible twist of his mouth, and the wet of tears at the edge of the old man's eyes. He looked away and lowered his head. They rode along in silence.

AND all the anger and bickering that had been between them in their lives was put away and forgotten. For Vern knew it was Matthew Colton's love that was speaking. And Matthew knew that Vern's silence was acceptance of it.

"Can you show me the way?" Vern said, at last.

He spoke softly, almost whispering, for the words came from deep in his consciousness. In the dust of weary trails, in the smoke of honkatonks and lonely camps and in the misty hush of sleepless prairie night, he had recognized the truths that Matthew now hammered home. This was admission of them, and of his own failure.

"I can help," Matthew said. "I can give you something to fight for."

He turned his fierce, pale eyes away, unwilling to show the emotion in them. He looked at the green-brown roll of country, at the mist-gazed loom of far hills beyond.

Within the scope of these horizons were the years of his life, his work and his struggle, his triumphs and defeats. It was the shape of his empire he saw, and perhaps his mind saw the end of all such empires.

"None of us last forever," he said. "I'm an old man, and I'm tired. I've put my ambitions behind me, and all I want is a peaceful place to rest my old bones in the sun. Ten years ago I made my will, and yours is the only name in it.

"I've always planned that the Triangle should pass to you some day, and why should we wait for death to say when? My lawyers in Jefferson have prepared the papers that transfer the ranch and its holdings to you, and tomorrow I'll sign them. The Colton brand and name will be yours to carry on.

"Don't argue!" he snarled, as Vern's lips framed a reply. He had himself in control now, and his features were twisted in the familiar irascible frown. "Sell the place, if you don't want it, or give it away! Let it rot, like you did your other spread, or fight for it as you choose."

He reined the buckskin around. "I'll be back when my business is done. I bid you good day."

He rode toward the trailing buckboard, and Oscar gave him a bundle from beneath the seat. He returned to a fork in the road they had recently passed, and rode off toward the north at a steady lope.

Vern kneed the sorrel to follow him, then pulled up and waited for the buckboard.

"Where's he going?"

"He stop wit' Dan Weaver tonight," said Oscar. "The stage for Jefferson go past dere."

Vern turned the sorrel around and rode on into the path of the coppery sun. His thoughts were incoherent. His mind was a cluttered kaleidoscope in which all his past was shuffled and confused. He saw himself as a youngster, riding this very road. He danced with Jenny again—at the Pine Grove schoolhouse, that was—and he saw the pinpoint eyes of the marihuana-crazy Mex who came at him with a knife in Abilene.

Suddenly he slapped his mount into a swifter lope, into a breakneck gallop, and for minutes he rode blindly on.

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In a little while he slowed, halted beside the road. His sleeve swabbed the sweat from his face. He breathed deeply, sitting there, and stared curiously at his own hands as they rubbed together.

They were steady hands. All of him was steady now. He felt an ease throughout all his body, as if the wind of his ride had cleaned him of some deep-seated ache.

From his pocket he took the flask of whiskey. He spun it into the air, caught it, then hurled it far among the buckbrush clumps.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DYNAMITE!

IT WAS almost sundown when he turned into the familiar tree-lined road to the ranch house. As the surrounding country had built up, Matthew Colton had pushed his grazing operations deeper into the wild hills, but the old home place remained his headquarters.

Now Vern saw a rise of smoke from the chimney of the bunkhouse that had been little used in recent years. He glimpsed a mill of horses in the old corral beyond.

He was washing up at the bench outside the kitchen when a long-faced man appeared. From battered black hat to worn boots he advertised his profession: range hand. But Vern noted that his holster was slung low, and tied. Every loop in his cartridge belt was studded with a bright bullet.

He had coughed loudly to announce himself, and he came forward slowly. "I reckon you're Mr. Matt's nephew. I'm Tom Barnaby, if you recall the name."

The greeting he had learned to give was a brief nod and a measuring stare; yet Vern found himself moving instinctively, reaching out his hand. It was a small gesture, but it caused the tightness of Barnaby's lips to relax as their palms met.

"I been around to the line camps," Barnaby said, "and I brought twelve men along. There was twenty more that cussed me out when I passed 'em over. The Triangle mostly hires working hands, but these twelve can shoot more'n a little bit, and they're all boys you can depend on.

"I left a couple to ride the north strip. Mr. Matt said we'd take the rest of our orders from you."

"I never did get that business quite straight," said Vern. "What's the trouble out there?"

"Why, that's what the lawsuit's about. The Land Association claims Mr. Matt's title to the strip is no good. They licked him in one court already, and now it's up for appeal. That's the section the railroad was plannin' to cut through, I hear.

"His lawyers told Mr. Matt it was important to keep the nesters out until the case was fought through."

Vern nodded. In all the courts of the West, these days, they were haggling out land grants and transfers and deeds. Scissorbill attorneys and corrupt judges had caused a situation in which many a man was relying on the old saying that possession is nine points of law. And many a gun was backing that possession.

He went across to the bunkhouse with Barnaby, and faced the scrutiny of ten men who fell silent as he entered. There were two or three of the faces he thought he remembered from the old days, but he could not recall the names.

There was knowledge of his gun-hand reputation, he thought, in the reserve with which they eyed him.

Mr. Matt's nephew. A Colton, but still a stranger.

He nodded to each one as Barnaby called their identities, and facing them he knew the shame of what he had been. Here were men who had buckled on their guns without question when the need arose. In loyalty to Matthew Colton and the Triangle they would fight, and perhaps they would die.

Not for ten dollars a day, or a hundred. Not for glory or mock heroics, but because it was part of their simple creed of working and living.

He spoke without thought: "Tom Barnaby will continue to give orders. Mr. Matthew, he dropped this whole thing in

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my lap, and I don't know where to begin. I don't aim to start any trouble unless the Triangle's crowded into it. We'll give the other side first lick, and then we'll know how and where to hit back."

His voice was gruff in the silence. He was turning self-consciously when he became aware of Tom Barnaby's grin. To his surprise he saw that many of the others were leaning back in the bunks, relaxing, and that some of them were smiling.

"We heard what happened in Rapid City today," Barnaby said, "and we kinda liked the sound of it. Next time you cut loose—well, I reckon you can count on a little backin'."

VERN left the bunkhouse with a sense of warmth inside him that no whisky had ever brought. He had the feeling that a door long-barred had been opened to him, that the stranger had been welcomed into the house.

Myra Waddell sat across the table at supper, and his sense of ease increased. She had a pleasant way of talking, and she told him the local history of the years he had been away.

They sat on the porch steps a little later, and from his vantage in the shadow Vern studied her face as the glow of light from the front hall revealed it.

She was a strange girl. Not pretty, exactly—in some ways you'd call her plain—but she had a softness and gentleness that you saw. She didn't have the quick and ready laughter of some, but her smile went a long way.

And sometimes—he noted this with vague surprise—she wasn't as young as she seemed to be.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, continuing the discussion, "that neither the ranchers nor the Land Association will admit the vigilante raids? I understood they left signed warnings and such."

"Oh, they admit some of them—mostly counter-attacks, defending themselves. But the Cattlemen's Committee claims the Association gunmen burned their own nesters out, just to start trouble. Each side maintains the other one wants to start a war."

"And so far the Triangle's just stood on the sidelines, eh? That doesn't sound like Uncle Matt."

Myra shook her head. "He says there's something crooked behind the whole affair. Something that nobody realizes yet. He—I'm very happy that you're going to stay. He was afraid—I mean, he's really very fond of you, though he may not show it. He's been keeping track of you, through people here and there, ever since you—you—"

"Since I went to Hell," Vern said. He looked out at the blue dark. "And he threw down a rope when it got too hot for me."

"You didn't need a rope," she said softly. "You would have climbed free."

He shook his head thoughtfully. He saw her moving hand, but this time he did not draw away. She touched his arm, patting him as a mother might reassure a child, and he could not account for the emotion that soft touch bred in him.

His arm went around her and drew her toward him, not swiftly fierce but in the measured slowness of a dream. Her eyes widened, then closed, and she was soft against him as he kissed her lips.

He loosed her abruptly, jerked to his feet.

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

She looked up at him, drew her hand across her mouth. "I know," she said. "It was—it wasn't me you kissed. I was just—"

Her voice choked off, and her arm lifted to hide her face. She sprang up quickly, ran past him into the night.

"Wait!" he called. "Please—"

And then he heard the sounds of confusion, the lifting voices, and men came running from the bunkhouse.

"Colton!"

Tom Barnaby had grabbed up a lantern, and his face was grim in the glow of it. He came panting up to the steps.

"They're movin' in on the strip!" he cried. "They killed Frank Eakins, and shot the Kid as he got away. He just rode in below with two bullets in 'im!"

Oscar came charging around a corner of

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the house, thrust a rifle into Vern's hand. "Mr. Matt'ew—his gun," he breathed.

"Horses!" Vern called sharply. "Saddle and ride!"

THE night was gloom-black, heavy with the damp of rain to come. A man rode up with saddled horses on lead, and Vern climbed aboard a chesty, heavy-legged roan that leaned into the bit with a hard mouth. He spoke quick instructions to Oscar.

"Let's go!" Barnaby shouted, and they went with a drum of hoofs. Across the cleared land at the rear they pounded, then single file through a brushy gully to the old back trail Vern dimly remembered. He gave the bay his head, settling his pace to the speed of the rider in front.

Through the night, with the dark pressed close.

And why he had kissed her there, Vern Colton did not know. Of all the events of a day of shocks and surprises, that was the most inexplicable.

"It wasn't me you kissed," she had said; and that was true. He had kissed not a woman—or so it had seemed in that strange instant—but rather all woman, all the decency and sweetness of woman that Myra represented.

And with that kiss, he had the thought now, he had broken free from the last clinging grip of Jenny's dead fingers.

Another horseman crowded up beside him. He glanced across quickly, then cursed.

"I told you to stay back there—"

"Mr. Matt'ew, he say to stick by you," Oscar shouted back at him. "W'ere you go, I go."

He was hatless. The wind ruffled his pale hair and flapped the slicker draped over his shoulders. In the dimness his great dark bulk dwarfed the horse he rode, making him seem like a man ludicrously astride a child's pony.

Vern cursed him for a thick-headed fool, kneeing his roan to a swifter pace. But Oscar stubbornly kept his position, the nose of his mount at Vern's saddle girth.

The rain began to sprinkle lightly in mid-journey, and was drizzling steadily by the time they came to Six Mile Creek. They splashed through the ford, and as they topped the wooded rise beyond they could smell the thick odor of smoke.

Soon they could see the lick of flames in the distance, and men shouted oaths as they pushed their mounts on.

They found Frank Eakins with his rifle beside him, his dead face upturned to the rain. The fire had gutted the cabin, and the roof caved in with a shower of sparks moments after they arrived.

"Tracks!" Tom Barnaby yelled. "Don't go cutting up the ground!"

But they knew they would have no track to follow through this rugged country, not with the dark and the increasing rain.

They discovered the hoofprints of the attackers; eight or ten of them was the estimate. They had galloped off in a group, apparently headed east.

"Toward Rapid City," Vern said. "No attempt to scatter. They didn't try to hide their tracks. What do you say to that?"

"I say they're askin' for what they get," Tom Barnaby retorted. "Look at this!"

He held out a half-filled sack that one of the men had found near the destroyed boundary-markers of the Triangle. The sack held fresh-cut claim stakes, such as nesters use to mark their plots.

"It's plain as your nose," Barnaby said. "They came light-footin' up, the way the Kid tells it, not expectin' to find any guard at the cabin here. When Frank hailed 'em, they shot him down. They'd have got the Kid, too, if he hadn't had a faster horse. In the dark he couldn't tell who they were, but this makes it plain."

He hurled the bag down.

"The Association sneakin' in to set their stakes. Now, with a man killed, they'll claim it was vigilantes shot him and burned the cabin. They'll try to lie out of it; you wait and see."

"The stakes make it pretty obvious, don't they?" Vern said. "Almost too obvious, you ask me."

He looked around at the grim faces, ugly in the glow of flame. Frank Eakins had

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ridden beside these men, shared their cigarettes and blankets, and his murder was bitterness inside them. Here was enough stored dynamite, he thought, to blow Rapid City wide open—now, tonight.

And yet—

He lifted his hand in signal and they gathered around. He let his eyes travel from man to man before he spoke.

"Mr. Matthew put the Triangle in my charge," he said. "That means I'm responsible for every last Triangle hand. Am I right?"

There was a murmur of voices, meaningless.

"I never saw Frank Eakins alive," he went on, "and some of you men are his friends. But this is a ranch matter. He was killed on the job, and handling his killer is a job for the Triangle boss—which is me."

He looked at Tom Barnaby, and the long-faced range boss gave him a defiant stare. In a moment, however, he shrugged and nodded.

"That's talkin'," said a voice. "You're the man to call the play."

"That's what I meant," Vern said. "We're ridin' into Rapid City, and if this man's murderers are there we'll tend to them as may be. But the whole affair must be handled right. Now here's the way . . ."

## CHAPTER IX

### —AND TWO FUSES

IT WAS still lacking midnight when they rode into town, a wet and bespattered procession. The rain had suspended, and a ghost moon showed its face at intervals through tumbled masses of cloud.

They slogged along Center Street, dropping out two by two to enter the brightness of places of entertainment along the way.

Rapid City was wide awake and going strong. The noise and merriment spilled into the street from either side.

Vern and Tom Barnaby hitched at the Barrelhouse rack, and Oscar doggedly followed them into the smoky, blatant interior. The saloon was a big, high-raftered place.

A long bar ran back from the entrance to a table-bordered dancing space. Beyond were the double-decked gambling rooms, with twin stairways leading to a narrow balcony.

A piano and a squeeze-box and a banjo were making music that tried to lift itself above a rumble of harsher sounds.

The bar was packed two deep, but they found a side table near the door where Vern could sit with his back to the wall and watch the entrance. In the course of time a waiter served them glasses and a bottle.

Vern let his eyes travel, and they saw the picture of Rapid City's growth and change. The thick-voiced men at the bar were hobnailed miners, teamsters, pasty-featured townsmen. At the tables where peak-hatted cowmen once sat were percentage girls and city-dressed drummers and gamblers and drifters—the breed that a boom town attracts.

But what was the boom that had brought them here? Why should a simple squabble for range bring in these buzzards of the night?

And he saw the picture as Matthew Colton must have seen it. He saw these people as strangers crowding in, changing a familiar pattern of life, destroying the homespun weave of the old days to replace it with brighter, fancier cloth.

New times, new ideas. The world moves on. In other towns, from the Milk River north to the Rio Grande, the same was happening.

Progress, they called it. Civilization. But it was strangely like the civilization that the red Indians learned from the mouths of bottles and the muzzles of muskets.

"Ain't you drinkin'?" Tom Barnaby asked.

Vern shook his head. Tonight he did not need the warmth of whisky.

The other Triangle riders straggled in, two by two, and gave their whispered reports. All along the street they had asked questions, gleaned information, and now the details were affirmed.

Late that afternoon Jarnell had ridden from town with a group of his Association

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guards. They had returned little more than an hour ago. Such were the simple facts.

"Looks bad," Vern said.

"Bad for them," said Tom Barnaby grimly.

Vern stood up, stretching, flexing the muscles beneath his sodden coat. Above the heads of seated men he saw Stella coming along the bar. She was dressed in green and gold, her black hair regally piled, and she tapped this man with her fan, gave her wise smile to the next one. The wave of her hand to Vern was a greeting and a command.

"I was looking for McKee," he said, standing beside her. Her spiked heels lifted her to his height, put her dark eyes on a level with his own.

"He had outside business this evening," she said, "but I expect him back before long. In the meantime—won't I do?"

"You'd do for any man," he said, and their steady glances dueled. Men turned from the bar to observe them, and Vern could sense the whisper of his name.

"I have a small affair to tend to now," he said, "but I'll be back. Could I see you then?"

She shrugged. "Why not? I'm hired to be seen, to entertain, to listen to the boasts and the sorrows of the customers."

"I'll match my sorrows with yours," Vern said, "winner take all." He touched his hat, nodding. *"Hasta luego, señorita."*

There was a breath of silence along the bar as the Triangle riders followed him outside. Men trailed out to the porch to stare after the group as they marched along the walk towards the Land Association office. They halted across the street from it.

"You come with me, Tom," Vern said to Barnaby. "The rest of you wait here." He set his teeth together, grinning crookedly. "Except you, of course, Oscar. I'll need you stepping on my heels, and breathing down my neck, in case I drop my handkerchief."

THE office was a narrow slab shack, once a harness shop, with a slattern porch and a big wooden sign above. Light came from the two windows and the opened door, and the shadows of men moved within.

Tom Barnaby's hand dropped to the butt of his gun at sight of the guards in the porch shadows. Three of them, and each had a rifle.

"No, Tom!" Vern said distinctly. "There'll be no trouble—not right now." His boots clumped across the porch. He paused inside the doorway, surveying the long room.

This was the shipping depot, theoretically, through which the grangers purcased equipment and supplies on credit. Shelves along the sides held various staples, and piled sacks of feed, of flour and beans, climbed the rear wall.

Six-eight silent, motionless men stared at Vern as he entered—the Association gunhands.

Jarnell sat at a battered desk near the front window. He leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and he nodded as if this visit had been expected.

"Do these belong to you?" Vern asked. He dropped a mud-daubed sack on the desk, and a boundary stake spilled from the neck of it.

A cord throbbed in Jarnell's thick neck, and his shifting eyes had a shine in the lamplight, looking down. He lowered his hands, and his chair settled with a bump. He eyed the sack, shrugging.

"We get sugar in bags like that," he said. "There's a whole batch of stakes like that on the shelf yonder. Why do you ask, Colton?"

"Because a Triangle man was murdered tonight, out on the north strip," Vern said. "Another was wounded bad, and a cabin burned. Our markers were destroyed. All this was done, within a couple of hours after dark, by a band of riders who rode back toward Rapid City, leaving this sack behind."

"Do I look like a fool?" Jarnell said quickly.

"I don't know," Vern said. "The men that did the job wanted trouble awful bad."

"It was Frank Eakins that was killed,"

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Tom Barnaby growled, "and we don't aim to let it pass. We know you were gone from town tonight, Jarnell. Can you tell just where you an' your gun-trash rode? Have you got another cooked-up alibi?"

Vern's fingers on his arm could not check the hasty words, and they were a mistake. They accused Jarnell too soon, crowded him too hard. They challenged him in front of his men, demanding a harsh answer.

"Since when," he said, "do we owe *you* explanations? Why come whining to me with your troubles? Do we complain to the Triangle when a homesteader is horsewhipped or shot down or burned out?"

Red anger had surged into his face, and his eyes had a hard, glassy glitter. "If this is your way of starting the fight, Colton, then hop right to it!"

His wrath was a spark that ignited Vern's temper. His fingers clenched into fists and his jaw squared. "All right," he snapped. "If you're asking for it, here it is.

"The Triangle is due a full and complete explanation of where you rode tonight, and why, together with proof of what you claim. I'll be back here at five tomorrow afternoon, and you'll have your answer ready then, or else!"

"It's ready now," Jarnell snarled. "The answer is—come shooting!"

THEY faced each other across the desk two men strung tight with restrained emotion. In both of them was the cold eagerness that a prize-fighter knows, watching his opponent across the ring, waiting to lose the ache of suspense in the hot flurry of blows.

Vern was first to regain control. His shoulder lifted. "We'll be here," he said quietly. "It was bound to come sooner or later, Jarnell. I could see this country wasn't big enough for the Triangle and your Association both, nor for you and me. Well, you've had fair warning."

The fat man's thick lips twisted. "All right," he rumbled, "and here's the same for you." He slapped a paper on his desk. "Here's my orders to move in on the north strip tomorrow, according to the rule of the courts. Well, I'll set the time now. We'll take over the north strip as soon after five as we're free to attend to it."

"That's clear enough," Vern said. He nudged Tom Barnaby, turned coolly to survey the men in the rear, and went across the street to join the waiting Triangle hands.

"Tom will tell you about it," he said. "As long as we're here we may as well look the town over. Arrange some place we can meet at two o'clock, say. I'll be at the Barrelhouse."

He had a queer feeling of calm, as if the worst were done. His head was clear, his thoughts were sharp, and there was an ease throughout his body.

"Come on, Oscar," he said. "I'll introduce you to a gorgeous lady."

BUT Oscar preferred to stand at the bar. Vern found a wall table at the rear, near the dancing space, and he had been sitting there perhaps fifteen minutes when he saw Stella moving through the tables toward him. He came to his feet, held a chair to seat her.

"That wasn't necessary," she said. Her voice was deep, for a woman's. "Isn't that why men come to places like this—to forget politeness and all such things?"

"It was just a notion I had," said Vern. "It pleased me to do so."

He sat across from her, aware of the perfume she wore, her steady regard, the sheen of ivory that her skin had. "What do we talk about?" he asked.

"That usually depends on how drunk our customers happen to be. In the early stages they tell what devilish fellows they are. A little later they want to know how a beautiful woman can endure a life like this. After that they begin to unload their troubles. Which do you prefer, Mr. Colton?"

"Let's try the middle one," he said. "Or, no—that's none of my business. Name something else."

"There's always love," she said. "That's always a favorite subject. Were you ever in love?"

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"I thought I was." He shrugged. "Now I don't know. What is it like; how does it feel?"

He looked at her intently.

"I could tell you," she said, "if I had a million words. I know this much: it isn't an ache, or a wild delight, or something you feel with every beat of your heart. It's a steadiness you have, a comfort that's with you night and day . . ."

She leaned toward him as she spoke, and he saw how tightly her fingers were clasped. Her face had an animation that made her seem younger, softer. And he thought: Her man will never have to worry about someone else who might come along. She'll stick with him through the ups and downs, the rough and smooth. She'll fight for him.

"You weren't listening," she said as he glanced up. She laughed shortly. "And why should you? It's all nonsense, isn't it? Would you buy a lady a drink?"

He was glancing around for a waiter when he noted Tom Barnaby's signal. The Triangle range boss came across from the bar. "I saw Wink Beecher down the street," he said. "Inquest on Landreau and Clay Unger tomorrow morning. You intend to be there?"

Vern nodded. "You'd best send a couple boys back out to the place, just in case. The rest could stay overnight, I reckon."

"If we need any help tomorrow," said Barnaby, "I guess there'll be plenty handy. The news of your showdown with Jarnell has got around already, and the Triangle's a popular brand again with the cowfolks. They claim they'd have run the nesters out long since if Mr. Matthew had sided with them."

There was a restrained elation about Barnaby; he was grimly enjoying this and he would enjoy its climax.

Vern went back to his chair, but as he seated himself he was sharply aware of eyes intent upon him. There is an instinct that the gunhand develops in his trade, and it was warning him now. He turned quickly, his hand dropping to his thigh.

The dark eyes of Keno McKee were watching.

## CHAPTER X

### KNOCK DOWN, DRAG OUT

THE tall gambler stood midway on a rear staircase, and for seconds he remained motionless there. Then he continued his slow descent, but his stare was still fixed upon Vern as he came along the wall toward the table.

"I see our friend is back from his little trip," Vern said.

"And angry," Stella said. "He gave me orders not to talk to you."

Vern looked at her quickly. "Was there any particular reason?"

"It was a matter of pride with him. He disliked the way you looked at me."

"Did you dislike it?"

She did not answer that.

McKee stood beside the table. He nodded curtly.

"It occurred to me, Colton," he said, "that we had some talk about Bucky Landreau before he cut down on you this afternoon. Under the circumstances you might be justified in thinking I had something to do with it. Have you any such notion in mind?"

"I did think about it, yes," Vern said. "I was goin' to ask you about it some time."

McKee took a long cigar from his pocket. His watch-chain instrument snipped. "If I had planned the ambush," he said, "you wouldn't be sitting here tonight in such charming company."

But he did not glance at Stella, even then.

"That's just about how I figured it myself," Vern said easily. "I judged Clay Unger and Bucky just threw in together by happenstance, and I'm letting it ride that way."

McKee rolled the cigar between his fingers in the silent pause. His lips moved to form a word, then tightened. "I just wanted to have it clear between us," he said, and he swung abruptly away. Vern watched him climb the steps to the upper gambling rooms.

He turned to Stella then. In his mind

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were Matthew Colton's suspicions of this place. What were the truths behind the sinister hints Mr. Matthew had shouted so freely this afternoon? Exactly what was the business that had busied Keno McKee tonight?

He said, "You're not his wife, are you?"

The shake of her was almost imperceptible. "What made you think—why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering," he said slowly, "whether—"

"Stella!" a deep voice shouted. "Where is she, the beautiful, beautiful queen of the night, peerless Stella?"

A man squeezed past the next table, laughing. He held a champagne bottle aloft. "We hit McKee's wheel for a case of this," he cried. "Come on, Stella, while the party's young!" He gripped her shoulder familiarly.

"No, please. I'm sorry—"

"Oh, come on, beautiful! The cow-nurse will excuse you."

"Take your hands off her," Vern said sharply, and the newcomer turned to frown at him. He was a ruddy, thick-shouldered man, neatly dressed, and his eyes said he was sure of himself and his own importance.

"Forget it cowboy," he said. "Go grab yourself another partner. This lady has important customers to entertain."

"No, please," Stella breathed. She sprang up as Vern squeaked back his chair. "Go 'way, Dallas. It's all right, Mr. Colton—"

The two men were like puppets jerked by the same invisible string. They stiffened there, staring—then the brief spell was broken.

Dallas Gardwell, gasping, tried to thrust himself backwards as Vern's hand shoved the table from his path. He tried to strike with the bottle he held, but he was not swift enough. Vern's blow drove past his fending arm and smashed into the curve of his jaw. The force of it sprawled him on the nearest table, and he tumbled down with a crash of broken glass.

Deep voices shouted, shrill voices screamed, and from every corner eager men came crowding.

VERN COLTON'S fist had ripped the blow automatically. The impulse behind it came from a blank brain. Dallas Gardwell, Dallas Gardwell—the name was his only thought.

It sang in his ears as he lunged forward, shouldering figures aside to get at the fallen man. He jerked the toppled table, kicked a chair, dodged the whizzing bottle that the frantic Gardwell hurled.

The man had scrambled up, was lifting defensive hands, when Vern struck the second time. His fist blasted into the ruddy face, padded bone crunching bone, and blood splayed.

Gardwell staggered back, and his smeared mouth uttered a horrible bleat of sound. His fear was shameless in his goggling eyes, and he covered his face with shielding arms.

He covered his face and ran.

He butted into the mass of men behind him, pushed at fright-faced women with his bloody arms. There were long nights when he must have dreamed of this meeting with the man whose wife he had stolen; and to his credit he had not fled at the first whisper of Vern Colton's name in town. Perhaps he had steeled himself for a showdown that must come; but in the face of it now his courage had utterly broken. He whimpered and ran.

"Elcon!" his shrill voice screamed at the crowd. "He's crazy, he'll kill me! Stop him, you Elcon men!"

And suddenly Vern Colton was laughing. There was a wild mirth that bubbled from deep in him, and the utterance of it was freedom and release.

So this was her man, Jenny's! This scuttling rabbit, this pitiful thing. Here were the arms she had gone to, flailing their cowardice. The lips she had kissed were blubbering pleas to braver men.

In that crystal-clear instant he knew Jenny for what she had been, and he knew himself, the Vern Colton who was going to be. With straining throat he laughed, and all the past was as dead as faithless Jenny behind him.

A slab-faced miner was lurching for him,

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hands reaching to grasp his arms, and he dropped that man like an emptied sack with one terrific punch.

"Elcon! Elcon!" they were shouting; "Pick and shovel!" was their cry; and all around the room there were figures springing up, half a hundred jacks-in-boxes. They doubled their fists and came rallying to the fight, the rough and ready hard-rock men. They were loyal to their clan and the whisky was hot in them.

"Elcon! Get him there!"

Three of them came at Vern together, spilling eagerly through the milling horde that bellowed pandemonium. One small man hurtled at his knees in a diving tackle, and Vern kicked him in the face.

He stepped away from the bull-rush of the second, and launched himself at the third from a crouch with both fists swinging. He hammered home four lightning blows before this one sprawled back and down, and the surge of his rush carried him into the small clearing of the dancing space.

They were coming at him from every side, then—too many to be marked apart—but he knew that all of them together could not still his wide-mouthed laughter.

THEY crowded in too fast to be held at bay. One tall fellow was swinging a chair, and as Vern lurched from the sweep of it another man sprang on his back.

He tried to hurl this attacker headlong in a flying mare, but cat-claw fingers were gripped too tight at his neck. They went down in a tangle, and others stumbled upon them in a furious, threshing, wrestling turmoil.

Vern kicked and bucked and squirmed, and suddenly the pile was lightened. Men seemed to bounce off his body, and he dimly saw the hulking figure of Oscar, and massive hands that lifted and scattered struggling men as if their weight were straw.

The big Norseman jerked him up, and for a moment they stood in breathing space.

"Driangle!" Oscar bellowed. "Yah!"

Above the tumult Vern heard the voice of Tom Barnaby, from somewhere close behind, yelling the same: "Triangle!"

He gasped a breath, and his bewilderment saw a curious happening. All up and down the bar and scattered through this place beyond were scores of men who shouted and punched, surged and struggled. The Triangle hands numbered no more than twelve, yet in this milling ruction were thirty peak-hatted figures, flinging their fists.

And more were coming.

They were piling through the swing-doors, range-tanned men who ran awkwardly on lifted heels, who yipped out "Powder River!" or some wild cowboy yell and piled into the affray.

They charged the first miner or city-dressed man they saw, and that was how the battle waged. No question asked, no invitation needed. Cowfolks in a tight, and the odds against them: that simple fact was cause enough, and they waded into the melee.

Oscar grabbed Vern's arm and they bulled their way to the wall where Tom Barnaby and two others were hemmed by six or eight. Vern knocked one of them down as he turned with a clubbed bottle, and Oscar accounted for two by slamming one man into the other.

Tom Barnaby had a tall man by the throat. He thumped his opponent's bald head against a timber, then let the limp figure drop. He wiped blood from his mouth, grinning.

"I don't know—when"—he panted—"I had so—damn' much fun!"

The men who faced them hesitated now. They drew back, breathing hard, and throughout the place the rumpus-roar was fading. The initial flurry had spent itself, the fighting edge that whisky whets had been dulled.

Here and there sporadic tussles continued, but the main groups were spreading apart. Men eyed the strangers with whom they had locked in combat, waiting.

Somebody began to laugh, and scattered grins appeared.

"Hold it there, all of you!" a harsh

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voice boomed. "It's gone far enough, you hear!"

Eyes lifted to the rear balcony, and to Keno McKee.

HE HELD a shotgun, and the five men who lined the rail with him, his dealers and lookout-guards, were rifle-armed. The rumble of sound below quieted, and movement halted under the threat of the guns.

It was a whim of chance, Vern thought, that no wild shot had been fired in the heat of the brawl. In the crowded room a single bullet-roar might have been the signal for a massacre.

McKee stared down at the shambles of his place. Broken-backed tables and shattered chairs strewed the floor. Jagged glass glinted everywhere, and the mirror-lined back bar was a ruin. The big gambler's lips curled back to bare clenched teeth.

He let the shotgun slide from his hands, and he stalked down the staircase with his gun-crew behind him. His glance had searched the floor as he descended, and he started straight towards Vern Colton. His hands were fists, and the black of his brows and his thin mustache were inked lines upon his grim pallor.

At the end of the room the gay-gowned percentage girls were huddled, frightened and disheveled, and all the screams and sobs squeezed out of them by now.

Stella came from among them, calling some soft command as McKee moved past. He cursed her soundlessly, with a convulsive snarl, and her outstretched hand fell to her side.

He stepped across a senseless man still sprawled near the wall to come to halt six paces from Vern. His voice was thick with fury.

"Is this what your orders called for, Colton?" he said. "Was it part of your damned sly uncle's scheme to wreck my place? Well, bounty-hunter, you'll pay for it! You started this affair tonight, and you'll answer to me."

"Just a minute, mister," Vern said with emphasis. "Before we go on from there, tell your gambling dudes to put down their artillery. And poco pronto—*now!*"

He moved slightly, letting his arm swing forward, and Keno McKee saw the drawn revolver that dangled in his hand.

And he saw more than that. Tom Barnaby was holding a gun, and three-fourths of the peak-hatted figures that stood around the room had lightened their holsters. They held themselves carelessly at ease, not threatening, but the weapons were there—and ready.

The saloonman moved his hand in signal. The five behind him placed their rifles carefully on the floor and stepped aside.

"That's fine," Vern said. "Now what was that you were saying?"

"Are *you* man enough to shuck your gun?" Keno McKee rasped. "That's the pay I want from you, Colton: fifteen minutes, and bare fists! Have you got the guts?"

VERN'S fingers moved at the buckle of his cartridge belt. He flipped it to coil around his wrist, thrust it toward Tom Barnaby. "Take care of this—"

But a big hand gripped his shoulder, turned him. A sweep of Oscar's arm thrust him back against the wall. "Dis is my somet'ing," the giant Norwegian said. "Mr. Matt'ew, he say I take care of dis man. I show you, mabbe, how you wrap me around my ears sometime, if you try."

He moved toward the black-garbed gambler at a shuffling walk, his head jutted forward between the thick humps of his shoulders and his spread hands swaying at chest height. He was a wrestling bear, a flesh-and-bone juggernaut.

Keno McKee moved a swift half-step. His hands darted, left and right, with a boxer's practiced skill. His fists splatted into Oscar's face with dull thwacks of impact, jarring the blond head with each blow. A trickle of blood sprang forth on Oscar's cheek, and the flesh at the rim of his eye was bloated suddenly.

He shook his shag of yellow hair and came on.

McKee shifted sidewise, a dancer on

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graceful toes, and his rapier left stabbed the bruised eye twice again. He was in with a mashing right to Oscar's mouth, and out again before the big hands could grab. Left and right, and another left—McKee retreating in a small circle and Oscar doggedly pacing him.

Thwack and shuffle and thwack again.

In a minute's space the bigger man's face was a mask of hideous red. In a teeth-clenched hush the great room watched twenty vicious blows that pounded Oscar's face to beefsteak, and not a single return.

Eyes saw the force behind the blows—saw the strength of McKee's shoulders leaning into them, saw the jarring shocks that jerked Oscar's head, that shivered his neck, that stiffened him momentarily but never stopped him.

There was sweat on the gambler's forehead now, and a frown of strain between his eyes. He kicked a chair into Oscar's path, dodged around a table, and was almost trapped as Oscar heaved the table at his legs.

He darted in with another blow for the swollen eyes, but this time Oscar's paw cuffed his fist away. He struck again, and Oscar's fingers clenched on his sleeve.

Cloth ripped as McKee lurched back. His tongue licked at his lips and he pushed back a spill of dark hair.

THE room breathed. Was McKee's speed slacking? How much more punishment could Oscar absorb, could any human absorb, this side of exhaustion?

McKee sent another chair spinning at Oscar's knees, then leaped back swiftly, bending. He snatched a bottle from the floor, smashed it with an instant blow. His fingers gripped the neck, thrusting the jagged weapon forward.

It was Marquis de Barroom rules tonight. No holds barred, and first eye out for the whisky.

The dark gambler's mouth moved in a snarl. He feinted with his left hand, stepping nimbly. He started another circling movement, planning to beat down Oscar's arm as the bigger man turned, and dart in with a gash of his ugly weapon. One sure stab, driven home, might finish it.

He hammered at the reaching arm and lunged. He rammed the jagged circle of glass with all his might at the bloody giant's face—but this time the face wasn't there.

In an agony of motion McKee tried to crouch, to whirl aside; but a steel-fingered trap clamped his wrist, jerking him to meet the other mighty hand that sought his throat—and found it.

And he could not break the relentless grapple, he could not wrench away.

His knee lifted a vicious thrust to Oscar's groin that jarred a gasping groan from the puff-lipped mouth. He clawed the fingers of his free left hand at Oscar's eyes, and they could not reach the mark.

He tried to sink his teeth in the hairy wrist, to kick himself frantically free; and in that desperate flurry he was a writhing coil of jungle-cat fury that staggered the locked pair of them, spun them in a death-throes dance.

He jammed the butt of his hand beneath the square chin and thrust against it until his muscles cracked. But the grip at his throat would not relax.

There was a humming murmur that swelled in the brain of Keno McKee. He was slammed back against the wall—he remembered that—and he sat there slumped, attempting a feeble kick, as a wavering form bent over him.

Hands hauled him, lifted him, poised him dizzily on high—

And after that he did not remember.

THE throngs of the curious were gathered thick on the porches and in the muddy street outside. Men had flooded forth from the other bars, and half-dressed women from down the line had hurried to join the watch.

It seemed to Vern that half the town was collected. Strangers called his name and spoke approval as he went along the walk with his group of Triangle hands.

In the narrow lobby of the Blue Rock Hotel a lot of hand-shaking was done. A gray-haired man, his nose a swollen blob

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and his bloody shirt in tatters, gripped Vern's fingers in a horny palm.

"Name's Dode Pascal," he said. "All we want, me an' my boys, is to hit them granger gunmen a lick. Kin yuh use three more good rifles tuhmorrer, Colton?"

Vern shook his head. "It's the Triangle's fight. We sure got men enough to handle 'em."

He made his way upstairs, after a while, to the room where Tom Barnaby was ministering to Oscar. The big Norwegian had scorned a doctor, and submitted only reluctantly to hot cloths and raw beef for his battered features.

He sat on a bed that sagged beneath his bulk, stripped to the waist, and removed a chunk of meat to peer at Vern with the slit of a blue eye.

Vern leaned against the door, kneading bruised knuckles.

"McKee could have licked me the best day I ever saw," he said. "He's too much man for me, bare fists. And what does that make *you*, Oscar?"

Puffed lips grunted. "He hit hard," Oscar said, "but I t'ink mabbe you last a liddle longer."

It was a gruff compliment.

"What I can't figger," Tom Barnaby said, "was what happened when you picked the son-of-a-gun up an' lifted him over your head. I'da swore you aimed to toss him over the bar there."

"No," said Oscar gravely. "I was mad yust a minute, but I put him down. He was a tough man an' he fight good. No use to kill 'im."

He turned his grotesque face to Vern. "Mr. Matt'ew, he is smart. You make a good man, too. You are all right, I guess."

"The same to you, Oscar," Vern said. "Will you shake on it?"

"Sure, I guess so. Why not?" And his lips formed a painful grin as their hands clasped.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK


**The Green Lama**

***and the strange case of the***

**"Death's Head Face"**

A Murder Corporation, from which not even the **Green Lama's** hidden laboratory is safe, sends its chief executioner, the ***Man with the Death's Head Face,*** to ***"liquidate"*** this mystic sleuth who fights crime with the age old secrets of the **Tibetan Lamas** —***and it makes a story that is too crammed with exciting thrills and action to miss.***

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*Short Novelet*

Toby, balancing on two lengths of hose, was carrying the girl. The ambassador lined the sights of his gun

# Very Warm for Washington

**Three things a Capitol columnist ought to know: A Fish House punch has nothing to do with boxing; the Fifth Column is not the right center of a newspaper; and putting the heat on the Embassy has nothing to do with the weather reports**

By WILLIAM BRANDON

## I

VISITORS going through the State Museum for the Insane at Parkersville, Indiana, would sometimes encounter a pleasant little guy who looked like Sir John Falstaff without the whiskers—in other words, like W. C. Fields—and if they chanced to pause and shoot the hock with him they would always ask the accompanying attendant later, in amazement, if the little guy was an inmate.

To which the attendant would answer: "Utterly nuts, ladies and gentlemen, utterly nuts."

Exclamations. A woman would say, "Why, he seemed just as normal as you or me," and giggle nervously. "He *must* have an interesting story."

The guard would shake his head mysteriously. If his public continued to urge him he would offer grudgingly: "Well, he used to be a wealthy man, I guess. Found a gold



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mine, or something like that, in South America."

"Heavens! Really! But how did he get *here?*"

"His wife had him inculcated. Went nuts after he got rich, I guess. Started throwing his money away. Burned down his fine house. Gave his money away to people on the streets."

"Gracious!"

"My soul and body!"

"Has he—mm—been here long?"

"Nope. Six months, I guess, maybe a year, more or less. Likely to stay though. He's—"

"Has—oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to interrupt. Please go on."

"That's all right, ma'am. What was you going to ask?"

"Has he a name? Or do you give them numbers?"

"Sure. Charles Theodore Black. Mostly we call him Steamer. That was his nawmdy gwary when he used to be a fighter, I guess. Some years ago, before he made his money."

"Goodness, a boxer? He's not very large and he must be past fifty—oh, you said years ago. Is . . . is that what's wrong with him now? I mean punch—punch crazy?"

"Nooo, I don't think so. I'll tell you, it's hard to say just where he's cracked at. I don't know what the docs call it. But he's sure incomitant. His wife got him found non coppus menace and got him put in here and I'll tell you she had to show plenty of evidence to do *that.*"

"His poor wife. That *poor* woman. She must feel awful!"

"She feels awful damn mad, I'll give as my opinion. Heh heh. Pardon my French. Marrying a rich fella and having him scatter his money broadside *and* go crazy on top of it."

. . . So it went until the day that Steamer Black read a New York newspaper which had found its way to his institution. From this paper the short gray-haired barrel-shaped ex-boxer and millionaire carefully tore a column. He folded it and put it in his shoe.

The next day he escaped from the asylum: a breeze, as he was a member of the yard gang assigned to drive a truck. He did so all the way south to Indianapolis where he took from a safety deposit box (held under the name of Theodore Steamer) a good deal of money.

He bought a suit of clothes and changed into it at the store. He rode an interurban car out of Indianapolis for twenty miles, stopped at a small town and bought a used car, paying cash.

In this clunker, which was a far from merry Oldsmobile, with so many miles under the hood it didn't want any more, and said so at every hill, he started east and south.

THE congress of our commonwealth has two reasons for avoiding a summer session. One is the profound belief, held by all members, that it is to their political good to get back home often and regale their constituencies with the first-hand story of their battles in Washington against the forces of evil: the opposition.

The second, more important, is the fact that Washington in the summertime is as hot as the downstairs of Hell.

The working Capitol press, having no voters to call it away, stays on the job during this off season, despite boiling thermometers and the dearth of important news. There is always some copy; someone in Washington is usually talking.

Tobias Shade sat in the way of three electric fans. A window was open in front of him, from which he could see the foliage of an old elm tree that stood before the house. A window was open behind him, with a view of some roofs, some trees, and a narrow panel of Arlington across the river including the distant Lee house.

He was in his office on the fourth floor of the red brick house on F street, an ancient structure with a past, a fanlight over the front door and a beaten inscription above that which read: *Justitia Omnibus.*

He was entertaining a visitor, a young brown-haired woman with soft, innocent

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eyes and exceedingly shapely legs. He was leaning back in his chair and absently studying them while she talked. His hands were locked behind his head; the wind from the fans whipped his shirt sleeves against the muscles of his arms.

The woman paused; he didn't answer and she said, "Toby, you're a devil."

"Because I don't need money," he said lazily, "I'm a devil."

"I hate you."

"Tsk tsk."

"I know you don't need money. I wasn't talking about money."

He glanced up briefly. He grinned.

"You beast!" she said softly. "Oh, Toby, you beast. You know what I meant."

"Sure."

"I did not! I only meant—a little favor. That's all I asked. Just for me . . . Stop looking at my legs!" She stood up and her innocent eyes were furious. "You won't help me, then? You won't help me, Toby?"

"Good bye, Countess."

"Don't call me countess! Will you, or won't you?" Her voice softened again suddenly. Her eyes were appealing. "Oh, Toby. It's so terribly hot. I can't argue with you. Don't you see; it's such a little thing, but it would mean so much to me."

"Nuts. Get out."

She stared at him. "Damn you!"

HE IGNORED that; said, "You should have known better than to try that line of slush on me. I know what kind of work you're doing. I knew you were going to work for Mills before you were even sure you were going to get the job. I know Mills is the principal propaganda agent in this country for the Nazis and the Reds, working under the direct supervision of Ambassador du Stue.

"I know you've worked for a couple of other European propaganda pigeons before. That's all you've done since you ditched your phony Count Rossi, and for all I know you were in the racket while you were married to him, since he's a paid apostle himself.

"What did you take me for? I'm no politician with my head in a trough. I know what goes on. That's my job."

"All this time you've been taking me out you've known—"

"Sure. I'll take you around some more. That's pleasure, not business. I like wrong women. Furthermore, if you'd come to me with the straight story instead of that amateur bellywash you've been giving me, I might have sent you to a man that would have taken your rotten little jobs.

"You wanted someone to press-agent and popularize the rotten little speeches of your rotten little gang of propagandists that's going up and down the country now spreading the good word that the dictatorships are the holy sides in their rotten little wars.

"You wanted someone to build up the books and pamphlets your outfit's turning out, and publicize the phony youth organizations and the crackpot resolutions, favorable to your gangster governments, that they turn out by the gross.

"If you could get a Washington columnist to drop in a word or a line here and there, keeping it subtle, it would get a bigger audience for all this rotgut and it might even help make it look legitimate. As if it stemmed from honest-to-Pete Americans instead of hired international stooges. Why didn't you say so? Why try to tell *me* —"

"Toby, you will send me to someone?"

"Not now. I would have, because it's my business to know everything and that would have helped me know more. But not now, Countess. You've made me sore."

"*Toby*—"

"Beat it." He dropped his hands to the arms of his chair, got up and opened the door.

He was tall, six feet three or four, but his shoulders were wide enough to keep him from looking thin. He had a slight natural stoop, acquired after he had got his growth and found that his head was high enough to bump into chandeliers. His hair was straight and black; his face was dark, giving him a half-Indian look. "I'll see you tonight."

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"You'll—see—me—tonight?"

"Sure." He grinned wolfishly and his lambent eyes flickered up to her angry face. "After business hours."

She drew in a quick breath. Her heels rapped on the floor and the door slammed behind her.

## II

THE door opened again so quickly he thought she had come back. Instead an old colored woman came in, sighed deeply and said, "You got another lady mad, Mister Toby."

She jerked her head at the door. "I declare, I believe you got a gift in that direction from your papa. The ladies, they romp in and they stomp out."

She put her head on one side and squinted at him and chuckled. She was rubbing her hands on her apron. "Your papa over again, indeed it is. But some day you meet a red-head lady like your papa met your mama and you watch her skin you down to the gum tree right. She surely will. They's a man downstairs to call on you."

"I've got work to do. Tell him to wait an hour or come back tomorrow."

"He says right now. He says tell you his name is Mr. Steamer."

"Well, tell—Who?"

"Mr. Steamer, he say."

"Steamer?"

"That's what I tole you twice."

"Send him up, Grace. No, I'll go downstairs myself. Won't work for a while now anyhow. Tell Henry to get going on a couple of Fish Houses."

"Mmm." Grace waddled after him out the door. "Lordy, it sure is hot."

Downstairs, Tobias Shade strode into the front room with his right hand extended and the word, "Steamer!" rising in a glad exclamation in his throat.

The room was empty. He looked around, puzzled, swung back to the hall and glanced into the library opposite. "Steamer," he bellowed. "Hey, Steamer!"

There was no reply. He opened the front door and looked into the shaded street. An old car drove past with a noise like a hayrake. The sidewalks were deserted except for a small colored boy who was trotting along with his thumbs in his ears and braying.

Toby leaned out the door and looked up at the inscription *Justitia Omnibus* over the door and it looked dingily back at him. He withdrew, slammed the door and shouted: "Grace!"

"All right, all right." Grace appeared, puffing down the curving stairs.

"You said a man by the name of Steamer was down here. Where'd he go?"

"Well," she asked vacantly, "ain't he here?" She peered around. "Why, he was standing right *there*—my stars, Mr. Toby!"

"What?"

"I just now recollected who that gent-'man was!" She took a sharp breath and snapped her mouth shut on it like a trap and stared at him. "Mr. Steamer Black, just as sure as—"

She raised both hands. "Now ain't that an intolerable shame! Why, he was the best friend your papa *ever* had! And to go right away like that, without even seeing you!"

Toby was scratching his chin with his thumb. "I remember him as a great guy. But I haven't heard anything of him since back before Dad died."

"No finer man ever walked on this earth," Grace said sternly, untying and retying her apron string, "than Mr. Steamer Black. What he wouldn't do for folks! I never see such a helpin' gent'man. And he did have the nices' little girl daughter, and sending her to Europe to go to school and all, and nothing but the best, and him as poor as a church mouse, and her poor mama dead—"

SOMEONE knocked on the front door and Toby opened it and bent his head to look out. The little colored boy who had passed a few minutes before was standing on one bare foot like a stork, staring up open-mouthed and holding something in his hand.

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Toby reached down and took it.

The boy pointed to his left and said, "A man settin' in his car down at the corner waitin' on the light give it to me." He sniffled. He was highly excited. He looked beyond Toby and said, "Hi, Grandma," to Grace, and she came forward suspiciously.

"He holler," said the boy, "do I know Mr. Tobias Shade; I say sure; he say take this to you right now and—and—" He changed feet and said swiftly, rolling his eyes back at his grandma, "He gimme this."

Toby looked up from the crumpled note and worn newspaper clipping he held to see the boy bring his other hand from behind his back and open it. A wadded hundred-dollar bill was exposed.

"Can I," shrilled the messenger, succumbing to hysteria, "keep it, Mr. Toby? Can I keep it?"

Grace surged up to Toby's shoulder. "What that?" she demanded. "What that boy done?" She reached through the door and caught the boy's retreating overalls. "You, Initial!"

She held him, squirming. "Mp. Money for your bank." She looked at the bill and said, "My stars and alligators," and closed her mouth quickly to save face by not being impressed before her grandson. "You get right around to the kitchen and maybe I'll give you a dime."

The note was written on a triangular piece of paper torn from an envelope and it read:

*Need your help boy*

*Hotel Sheridan*

*T. Steamer*

The name was underlined. Beneath it was written in an even more wild and furious scribble than the rest:

*Keep that clipp*

The final *p* trailed away. Evidently the light had changed at that instant and the Steamer had finished writing hurriedly and had handed his note and gratuity to Initial and driven on.

An antique Negro entered the library with two Fish House punches on a tray. He said leisurely, "It sure is one warm day, Mr. Toby."

Toby agreed and picked up one of the drinks. "Have the other one yourself, Henry."

"Thank you, Mr. Toby, I reckon not. Can't brag on that rum I had to put in 'em."

Toby looked at his half-empty glass. "What's wrong with it?"

Henry was shuffling for the door, his carpet slippers slapping against his heels. He stopped and said, "*Am*bassador *du* Stue made you a present of it. You told me to use it up."

Toby chuckled. "I forgot you didn't like him, Henry. Throw it out and get some Cinq-Saen."

Henry grinned faintly. "I surely will, Mr. Toby." He ducked his head and went out.

TOBY left his drink unfinished, leaned back in his chair, draped his legs over the library desk and unfolded the newspaper clipping the Steamer had sent with his note.

**TENNIS WEEK ENTERTAINMENTS ARE PLANNED IN NEWPORT**

**Mystery Mars Height Of Season; Bianca Luce Black Not Yet Found**

*Special to the Chronicle*

Newport, R. I., Aug. 19.—The disappearance of Miss Bianca Luce Black, debutante step-daughter of Mrs. Theodore Black, has attracted the major share of interest at this society colony. . . .

Miss Black vanished three days ago from a dinner dance at Vo Vum, the Narragansett Avenue villa of Count Rossi of Hungary, given in honor of Miss Marie Rossi, Count Rossi's niece.

Mrs. Black has stated her belief that there is no cause for alarm, explaining that, until this season, her step-daughter had been in the Auberg Switzerland School, and that possibly she had only wished to escape by herself for a while from so much that was new and strange to her, over here. . . .

. . . at first rumored to be an elopement,

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because of the simultaneous absence of Mr. Ehret Main, who has been Miss Black's constant companion since her arrival from Switzerland for the early season . . . but Mr. Main, reached later in Washington, D. C., explained he had no knowledge of Miss Black's whereabouts.

Monday sees the beginning of tennis week at the Casino . . . box and umbrella reservations are numerous for the tournament. . . .

Accompanying the few sticks of type was a cut of Miss Bianca Luce Black. Nothing much could be told from it except that she had hair, two eyes, a nose and a mouth.

She looked young. The expression on her face was defiant and apprehensive, as if she had just finished thumbing her nose at the photographer.

Tobias Shade lit his pipe.

Steamer Black had written that he needed help. The missing girl, then, was his daughter, the daughter Grace remembered as a little girl, and he needed help in finding her.

Also, the Steamer must have acquired a new wife. Mrs. Theodore Black, Bianca Luce Black's step-mother.

And as the item hadn't mentioned a Mr. Theodore Black it was evident the Steamer and the new little woman were separated.

But it was strange the Steamer would have given an estranged wife the custody of his daughter; let her bring the kid back from Europe.

One other name in the society story was familiar to him. Count Rossi of Hungary—Count Rigor Rossi—from whose villa Bianca Luce Black had disappeared. He had once been the husband of the girl Toby had been talking to a few minutes before, in his office upstairs.

He had once been, and probably still was, a paid but unofficial representative of the totalitarian bloc of Europe, with the job of quietly popularizing the dictators and their policies with the top crust of society.

Toby swung his legs off the desk, put the clipping and note in his pocket, and started out.

Grace stopped him at the door. "You going out, Mr. Toby?" Her black face was shining and she was fanning herself with a skillet as she quartered up the hall.

"Well . . ."

"Mp." Half of her disappeared into a closet and came out with a light suit coat. "You know it ain't right for a gent'man to go down to town withouten his coat on. Bad enough you going bareheaded." She helped him into the coat and he left, bending his height to pass under a low branch of the elm.

## III

NO ONE can know all the answers. Tobias Shade, Washington correspondent and columnist for the Hanover newspapers, had whipped his way to the top of his profession by keeping that fact in mind. You can't know all the answers but you can have a thousand friends around your beat to learn them for you. In Washington and foreign correspondence you can't work without them.

Not top flight officials: they talk for publication; they issue statements to grind axes. The little guys don't donate much at a time but what they give you will be honest.

Toby caught a cab on Connecticut Avenue. The driver turned one ear toward the back seat and said, "Hot day."

"Yeah." Toby took his coat off, folded it and put it in a corner of the seat.

"You know your colyum on Senator Cobb's one-man convention, Mr. Shade? That took a beating when you printed it, didn't it?"

Toby grinned.

"I told you," the driver said. "I told you what Cobb was working for. So now he's in line for a seat on Foreign Relations. Like I said. Makes you feel pretty good, huh?"

"No," said Toby.

"Well, I don't blame you. But at least you told 'em how he got there."

They pulled up in front of the Hotel Sheridan and Toby paused with his hand

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on the door. "Ever hear of Ehret Main, Sam?"

"Ehret Main." The drive reflected. He snapped his fingers. "Sure. He's staying in this hotel. I brought a Hungarian count from the station yesterday to see him here. Little skinny guy with a twitch in his cheek."

"The count or Ehret Main?"

"The count."

"Much obliged, Sam. See you later." He handed the driver a bill and got out. He left his coat in the cab.

"T. Steamer?" asked the desk clerk.

"T. Steamer," Toby repeated.

"Sorry, Mr. Shade. No one of that name registered." The clerk shot his cuffs. "Oh, by the way—" He glanced around briefly. "Senator Cobb's secretary is still in town."

"Is that so?"

"Seems to be putting through a number of calls to Ambassador du Stue." The clerk busied himself with the claptrap of his counter.

Toby struck a match and lit his pipe.

SENATOR COBB was already the Senate's foremost apologist for the dictator states. He had lined up an unusual amount of power for his party's convention and it was rumored that he had purchased some of it with dubious dough.

If Cobb could trade that power for a stronger voice in administration policy—such as would come with his new place on the Foreign Relations Committee—he could do Ambassador du Stue's country a lot of good.

But if it could be proved that du Stue had helped him buy those votes and delegates. . . . Risky business, secret connivance between a foreign diplomat and a pork-barrel patriot.

It might be true and it might not, but if proved it would ruin Cobb, du Stue would be recalled and five would get you fifty he'd find himself purged before he had time to wear out a pair of shoes on his native soil.

"Well, thanks, Mort," Toby said absently. He turned away from the counter.

He heard the clerk say, "You bet," and then he stumbled over something and looked down in surprise to see that it was an individual. A short fat towheaded young man dressed in a white suit that set off well his butter-colored skin. Jaundice or biliousness. Strange, sullen, sick-looking eyes. He stood as high as the third button on Toby's shirt.

"Sorry," Toby said.

"Sorry," the other answered.

Toby went on. He took three steps and heard the desk clerk back at his counter saying, "Yes, Mr. Main?" and turned his head and saw the butterball answering.

Ehret Main?

He returned to the desk after Ehret Main had concluded his conversation and rolled away.

"Wasn't that Ehret Main, Mort?"

"Why, yes. That's his name. Friend of yours, Mr. Shade?" The clerk grinned.

"I don't know."

"He seems to be rather important."

"What do you mean?"

The clerk shot his right cuff. "He was calling at du Stue's last night."

"You mean at the Embassy?"

"Right. That's what the starter said his driver told him. We thought it looked odd, as the Embassy is officially closed for the month, you know. Redecorating, or some sort of work. The staff is on vacation."

"Plumbing," Toby said. "It used to be the Russian Embassy and du Stue claimed they corroded the pipes. Now he'll have to take it back."

The clerk laughed. Toby lifted a hand and went out.

IT WAS a four-story yellow brick apartment house with a decorous doorway offset by a mattress airing in a second story window. Toby knocked on the door of apartment 1-B.

The door was opened by a brown-haired young woman with soft, innocent eyes and beautiful legs, thinly veiled by a diaphanous—there's a word—gown.

"You," she said icily.

"Me, Countess."

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"Don't call me—" The restrained fury drained out of her voice and she said curiously: "You're excited. What have you been doing?"

"Talking to a plumber."

"Who?" She waited. He was looking past her into the room. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I'll see you tonight."

"Toby," she called after him. She started into the hall. "Toby!"

She heard the decorous front door close behind him. She stamped a muled foot and angrily uttered a dirty word.

Toby left the apartment house and walked slowly down the street. He saw an ancient Oldsmobile start from a place a few doors beyond and cripple around the corner. It was bearing Indiana plates.

He reached the corner and saw the car waiting by the curb. A little guy who looked like Sir John Falstaff without the whiskers hopped out and said, "Toby Shade, by gad!"

Toby stuck out his hand. "How are you, Steamer?"

"In a terrible shape, m'boy. Did you get my note?"

Toby nodded, grinning down at the little guy's round, muscled face.

"I thought you'd wait at the Sheridan. I was going to get there before five and meet you but—How'd you know I was here?"

"You had some reason for leaving the house in a hurry. I remembered the countess had gone out while you were there. Didn't know why you'd follow her but I thought I'd take a look around on the chance you had."

"I did. Recognized her, b'gad. She was a friend of my wife's. In the same racket."

"Racket?"

"International intrigue, in a two-bit sort of way." The Steamer cleared his throat. "Son, you're the spittin' image of yor dad."

Toby grinned again. "Climb in that wreck and let's go."

"I can't leave here, boy. I'm watchin' that little lady's house."

"You won't find anything here, Steamer. Drive on, straight ahead."

"Listen, boy. I got to tell you about this."

"I know about it, Steamer."

The Steamer peered at him and got in under the wheel. "You know about it? Y'understand the girl's m'daughter?"

Toby nodded. The clunker bumped along and he said, "Goose it."

The Steamer jammed the accelerator down to the floor boards and the crate roared mightily and bumped along at the same speed. "That wife of mine," the Steamer shouted. "Burn her soul."

"Why'd you marry her?"

"I've always been a fool around a woman. She put me in a Bedlam, by gad. An asylum for the insane. She put me there. My own wife. Melinda."

"Put you there?"

"I said so. Me, son," he wheezed soberly, "I've always tried to live by the Golden Rule. Word for word. Literal. After I got rich I kept it up. Do unto others as you would have them do you. Somethin' like that. If you did a rich man a favor you'd like for him to give you a few thousand chunk, wouldn't you? He can spare it, y'say. B'gad, he can. I did.

"One day Melinda caught me giving fifty thousand bucks to a hat check girl. Cute little squirt. She says to herself, he's nuts, but to make sure I'd get put away she burned our house down and blamed it on me. They put me away all right. Out in Indiana."

"Indiana?" asked Toby, groping mentally.

"I've always kept my residence there."

"But why'd you let her get away with it?"

"Oh, I didn't mind. Int'resting place, a nuthouse. I'm writin' a book about it. Anyhow I knew I could leave whenever I wanted to."

"How?"

"B'gad, I'm out ain't I?"

"Out," Toby echoed stupidly.

"But I didn't think she'd bother Lucy. I didn't know she'd brought the kid over

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here until I read about her gettin' lost. She figured Lucy'd do her some good in her stinkin' business. Get her more standin'. Give her an in to some folks. Where the kid would meet their kids, and so on.

"That meant big potatoes for Melinda, meetin' stuffed shirts. Some European country pays her for introducin' their agents into polite society. Polite, b'gad. Dad blame her. Now gad knows what she's done with the kid."

"Did you look up your wife?"

"Egad, m'boy. She'd call the nuthouse. Couldn't go to the cops. They'd send me back. Remembered you. Newspaperman. Maybe even smart. Your old man—"

"Turn right at this corner. There's a drug store in the next block. I'll make a couple of phone calls."

## IV

TOBY replaced the receiver and spoke to the Steamer through the half-opened door of the phone booth. "Senator Artemus Cobb's secretary. I told him I wanted to get in touch with the senator. He said the senator had been at Westport, Massachusetts, for a week."

He wiped his sleeve across his forehead. He was half bent to fit the booth.

"All right, m'boy, so what? Tell me what you're doin'. For gad's sake. I'm in this. What's a senator got to do with Lucy?"

"She was at Newport, Steamer. Newport's about fifteen miles from this place, Westport Point. Where the senator's resting." Toby withdrew again into the booth.

The Steamer waited impatiently. "Who was that?"

"An Embassy secretary. They're great guys to deal with. They talk like electrical transcriptions."

"Gad bless you, boy! Whatinell'd you say?"

"I said I was checking a report that Ambassador du Stue spent last Thursday in conference with the acting Secretary of State." Toby lit his pipe. "He told me the ambassador wasn't in town last Thursday. The ambassador was at Watch Hill last Thursday. Resting.

"Watch Hill's about thirty miles from Newport. Last Thursday was the day your daughter disappeared."

"But by gad—" the Steamer wheezed, and stopped. Toby had turned back to the phone.

The Steamer heard him call the Hotel Sheridan and ask for the room clerk. He heard him say quietly, "Mort? I've got a message for Ehret Main, from Mrs. Theodore Black. She's coming down and he's to meet her at Beltsville, Maryland, on the incoming five o'clock. Got that?" The Steamer heard him chuckle.

Toby replaced the receiver, rubbed his sleeve across his forehead and called another number. He dropped his voice and the Steamer could not make out his words.

He came out at last, sweat plastering his shirt against his arms and shoulders.

"I don't get it," the Steamer said. "Recapitulate, m'boy. Tell me what's up. If y'think you know where Lucy is, for Gad's sake—"

"I'm guessing, Steamer. I don't know any part of it."

"Who'd you call last there?"

"Henry, Dad's old butler. Remember him?"

"Henry? Old Henry? Lord, yes."

On the sidewalk Toby swung around suddenly and said, "When we get there, Steamer, take it easy. Let me talk. Let me handle it. It's a ticklish business."

"Where?"

"To the Embassy. We're going to see Ambassador du Stue."

THE Embassy was a rococo palace with an exterior of Moorish arches, barbershop turrets and banks of casement windows. Inside were wide, paneled halls, deep rugs, empty desks in inconspicuous places and an unaccustomed silence.

The flunky who had taken Tody's request for an interview returned, drew himself up and declaimed:

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"His Excellency informs you that he is astonished at the hour of your visit. His Excellency is officially on holiday. The Embassy is officially closed."

"I'm checking an important story. I didn't want to print it until the Ambassador had a chance to deny it."

"If you will give me some indication of the nature of the matter—"

"Not you, my friend."

Some place in the interior a telephone rang once and in the brief silence following the Steamer lost control and snorted in the majordomo's face: "Get back, you bleating bleb, and tell His Excellency what this gentleman said. Gad, you fool, you stand in the way of history!"

Toby gripped his arm. The flunky looked startled. A buzzer sounded in the room. The servant shot another look at the Steamer, licked his lips, turned and went.

"The buzzer called him," Toby said softly. "Not so good. That phone call would have been about us."

The flunky reentered, scurrying. "His Excellency . . . so sorry to have kept you waiting . . . pleased to see you at once . . ." He looked at the Steamer out of the corners of his eyes. "This way, please."

HIS Excellency, the Ambassador Derrem du Stue, was florid, stout and bearded; poised, not too hearty; well dressed in an English pin-striped suit. A few hairs on the dome of his head were carefully brushed across a sunburned bald spot.

He looked up pleasantly. His hands were flat on the desk before him. "Ah, gentlemen."

Toby's voice was smooth and respectful. "Can Your Excellency give us a statement on the case of Miss Bianca Luce Black?"

The ambassador didn't change expression. After a few seconds he lifted his eyebrows.

"Miss Bianca Luce Black," Toby repeated. "She disappeared last Thursday, from the Newport home of Count Rossi."

The ambassador's left hand slid across his desk to a button. "I am very sorry. I am ignorant of this matter."

"Then Your Excellency issues no other denial to the story I am about to print?"

The ambassador's eyebrows lifted again. "I am making an effort to be patient. You speak of a newspaper article? If you will be more specific—"

"All right," Toby said slowly. "I will. I have knowledge that Your Excellency met Senator Cobb at Newport last Thursday, in secret. The meeting was arranged for you by Mrs. Theodore Black and Count Rossi. I have been told that they are both ex-officio members of your staff."

"Those are quite serious charges."

"It's a serious matter, Your Excellency. I have it on reliable authority that Miss Bianca Luce Black accidentally witnessed this meeting and overheard several things which would have endangered both Your Excellency and the senator, if she had been allowed to make them public. She told her stepmother, Mrs. Theodore Black, that she intended to do so. Consequently she was caused to disappear that night."

The ambassador smiled. "Your charges are more than serious, Mr. Shade. They appear to me ridiculous."

Toby took a notebook from his pocket and opened it and seemed to read from it:

"Another member of your unofficial family, Ehret Main, had been assigned to keep Miss Bianca Luce Black company while she was in this country, and to see that she didn't accidentally lead your organization into any embarrassments, which was possible, as she was kept innocent of the organization while still surrounded with it. It was his duty to take charge of the girl's disappearance, when that became necessary."

There was a silence and the ambassador said, oddly genial: "Please go on. I have known you for some time, Mr. Shade, as one of the better journalists over here. With your experience I am surprised to find you concerned with this sort of rumor."

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Toby looked blank. "It comes from a reliable source."

The ambassador chuckled. "Quite so, no doubt. They usually do. It is needless to say that I shall take no official notice of it, even though you proceed with its publication. It is far too absurd to be dignified with protest. But I am interested personally in the invention. It is exceedingly adroit. There is more?"

"Some. The agreement that passed between Your Excellency and Senator Cobb at that secret meeting, for one thing. The senator agreed to use his influence to soft-pedal Congressional investigations of youth organizations and other groups fostered in this country by your government, and to encourage the circulation of your propaganda pamphlets and books in this country's municipal and scholastic libraries.

"In return for this you agreed to assist the senator's political ambitions with large amounts of money and the hidden but active support of your propaganda network over this country."

The ambassador leaned back slightly in his chair. "Quite an amazing arrangement, indeed." He smiled and waved his left hand over the buzzer. "Of course you are aware that flirtation with lies may do you damage, Mr. Shade."

Toby snapped his notebook shut and put it in his hip pocket. "These aren't lies, Your Excellency. I'll have the proof when the charges are published."

"Then— What was that?"

"I said I'd have the proof. There's one last item. Miss Bianca Luce Black. Her evidence will support the story." He grinned and said, "I've found her."

"You've found her?" The ambassador's jowls stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's here."

"Here? You fool, are you mad?"

"Interested in plumbing, Your Excellency. I talked to your plumber today. You ordered his company off their job here last Thursday although the job wasn't done. The day Miss Black disappeared. That left your residence empty—ready to receive her for a while. Ehret Main brought her and he's been spending most of his time here with her since."

Behind him Toby heard the Steamer wheezing.

## V

THE ambassador was stabbing the button on his desk. "You will leave at once. I shall lodge an immediate protest in regard to this insult." He came to his feet and his chair crashed backward. He went on punching the button. "Or are you now presuming to make a search of this building? I will remind you that you are not now on American soil. This residence is under the jurisdiction of my state and my state only."

The flunky appeared and du Stue barked at him: "They are to leave at once!"

"Yes, Your Excellency." The majordomo looked agitated.

The Steamer stood still and began to swell.

The majordomo had sidled near the ambassador; he whispered briefly to him and du Stue, dabbing at his face with a neatly folded handkerchief, turned his attention from Toby for a moment and snapped: "Get him! At once! At once!"

"Yes, Your Excellency, but—"

"You won't find him," Toby said. "He's on a train."

The ambassador turned his head and stared at him.

"The ex-Countess Rossi called you," Toby said, "before we came in. She gave you the word that I might be finding out too much. That's why you decided to see me; to discover how much I knew. You discovered it was too much and you sent word to Ehret Main, to come and move the girl to another place, while you kept me talking in here. He had to do it; you couldn't trust her with anyone but him. But your servant couldn't reach him at his hotel. He's gone to meet a train."

"In the name of Heaven," the ambassador whispered. He made a slight motion

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to the servant with his hand. He held his folded handkerchief over his beard and studied Toby thoughtfully. "You are remarkably astute, Mr. Shade. No doubt you realize now the position I should be in if all you indicate were true."

"Sure. To use a native expression, you're up a certain creek without a paddle."

"You are mistaken. You forget that you are not in your country. This Embassy is my country. You can not call on your police for help. Not here. And in my country, Mr. Shade, desperate measures are taken to suit desperate predicaments."

He watched Toby and his eyes glinted as if they were filmed with sweat. He stepped from behind his desk and walked to the door. He said to the stooge, "Keep them here. Use force if necessary." He started out.

"Now," croaked the Steamer, "now, m'boy?"

Du Stue spun around and stared at them again in silence.

"Hold it," Toby said. "He's right. Nothing we can do. We're helpless here, Steamer. I went wrong. I thought he'd dicker for terms."

Du Stue said impassively, "Quite so."

The Steamer said, "The hell I'm helpless," and moved like a cat for the flunky, jabbing his left.

The majordomo displayed a lot of stuff. He rode back on the punch and produced a pistol before the Steamer could follow with his right.

For a moment they were all still—du Stue looking back over his shoulder calmly, the Steamer gazing at the Walther HP pistol with a hot and baffled stupidity.

Helpless. His left hand had only cut the stooge's mouth. He was too old. He found himself thinking of his age, of birthdays, in this unreal atmosphere, stifling, still, charged with the virulent threat of du Stue's words; the only real thing in the picture.

Du Stue would carry it out. He meant to. He was out of his head with fear and a big shot is no different from any hopped-up punk in that respect. In fear, the stomach rules the head.

What happened later didn't matter. Later, Lucy, his kid, would be dead. It was du Stue's purpose. The Steamer looked steadily and stupidly at the pistol. Lucy was the only item in his life he'd taken seriously. Without making a decision he set himself to jump for the gun.

He heard Toby say, in a flat voice: "I smell smoke. The next room."

IT HAPPENED quickly; it was like stage magic; it came in an instant, a billow of light gray smoke that rolled into the room and stayed there, weaving among them like a great amorphous snake, raising the temperature in the already hot room so that they seemed to be wrapped in a hot, smothering blanket.

From a distance there was the growing crackling of flames and above that they heard the faint howl of sirens.

"Fire," the Steamer whispered, and choked. "Fire, by gad, fire!" He twisted and shot himself through the smoke for the shadowy figure of the majordomo; his left hand slapped the pistol down and his right cracked the man's jaw.

Too high, he didn't fall.

The Steamer hit him again, twice, and heard him stumble against the wall and slide to the floor. He caught the sound of Toby's voice and followed it.

Someone was pounding on a door and there was the throb of a heavy motor.

The smoke cleared. The Steamer saw du Stue walking quickly, erect and stiff, through a door to the left. He charged after him. He reached the door and caught a glimpse of a helmeted fireman entering at the far end of an adjoining hall, a hose writhing behind him.

The smoke closed in again. He could hear du Stue choking and followed the sound.

They passed through two more rooms and came again into the hall and du Stue turned so fast he shouldered into the Steamer as he passed him. He went on without pausing.

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The Steamer was staggering; he was half blinded, holding his hand over his nose and mouth, breathing with short gasps. He tripped over the hose laid in the hall, got up and trotted on.

He heard Toby's voice; "Not now, Your Excellency. I'm off the reservation."

The Steamer went nearer. He could see Toby, tall and deformed, balancing on another length of hose. His deformation was the girl he was holding in his arms.

Du Stue was close to him. He was methodically wiping his eyes with his left thumb. He held a gun in his right hand.

"This hose," Toby said loudly. He choked and coughed. "There's no diplomatic immunity on it. Out of the way."

Du Stue was swinging the pistol up. He stepped nearer and bent his head to look along the sights.

Toby said in surprise, "You damned idiot," and threw the girl at his head.

The pistol's report was like a hard slap in the dead, thick air. The Steamer heard the bullet crack past his head, a twin to the muzzle blast, and du Stue went down under the girl's hurled weight.

Toby was pulling the girl away. She was out, possibly doped. The Steamer shut his eyes against the smoke and bent over and searched for du Stue. He found him, pulled him up with one hand and turned loose the other. He laughed, and tears ran down his cheeks from his inflamed eyes.

THEY sat in the living room of the brick house on F street, looking into a couple of Fish Houses made with Cinq Saen rum.

Miss Bianca Luce Black, a good looking little twist with an insolent air even while unconscious, was coming out of it upstairs; Toby admired it, the go-to-hell cast to her mouth and eyes. If she turned out to talk without a lisp and walk without a wobble he might ditch the Countess and give the kid a break; take her out as a favor to a friend of the family. He sighed.

"You're a dope, m'boy," the Steamer said. "First-class."

"I know my business."

"You're a traitor to your country."

"Sure. If I'd expose their whole setup half of it would be whitewash to protect this guy and that guy; in six months it'd be forgotten and there'd be a new outfit in its place that I'd have to learn from top to bottom. I'll leave the old one in. It's easier. They're scared now, they won't move far out of line for a while. That's enough.

"Cobb will retire from politics. Du Stue's resigning, as soon as he recovers from having that wall fall on him. Ehret Main's already outward bound on the *Ileana*. You can have your wife."

"Egad, I don't want her." The Steamer looked moodily at his drink. "I'm goin' back to the nuthouse mainly to keep away from her. Her money's gettin' low; she'll be after me and I'm afraid I'll break her neck if I see her."

"You're going back to Indiana?"

"Soon as I've had a vacation with Lucy. Got that book to finish. I'll get out when I'm done with it." He finished his drink and put down the glass.

Henry came in silently and exchanged it for a new drink. His left hand was bandaged. "Ha," said the Steamer, feeling good, "b'gad, you hit your wife."

"No sir," Henry said equably. He left the room, his carpet slippers slapping his heels.

Toby swirled the drink in his glass. "He burned his hand, Steamer. Starting a fire yesterday."

"Starting a fire. . . . You called him up on the way to the Embassy, son."

"That's right, I did."

The Steamer looked at him keenly. "B'damned, you're a dirty arsonist."

Toby killed his Fish House. "It's a warm day, Steamer."

Grace waddled into the room. "She's waking up, Mr. Toby." She waddled out and they followed her. "My goodness, it sure is hot."

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Hank stuck his right foot out neatly; the other man crashed to earth with Hank on top of him

By KURT STEEL

# Dead Of Night

WHEN the one and only HANK HYER is invited by MARCIA THAYER to investigate the disappearance of her father, the publisher NATHANIEL THAYER, he has no idea that even the stars in their courses are going to pile up on him. But from the very beginning, the planets raise havoc with the case.

Both Nat Thayer and his second wife, BERYL, are astrology fanatics, and they are especially gullible where that robust racketeer of the heaven, CLEARSE OWEN, is concerned. Owen's hold on Nat's affairs spreads even to the conduct of his publishing house, and PIERRE DAWSON, Nat's partner, is extremely resentful. Even more bitter still is RICH LANNING, Beryl's nephew and Marcia Thayer's more or less official fiancé, when Owen attempts to influence Thayer not to release to Lanning his inheritance, whose management is in Nat Thayer's hands.

Thayer, finding Rich's pranks too much to endure, fires him from the firm, forbids him to see Marcia, and freely acknowledges that he will follow the promptings of the stars—and Clearse Owen—as to the ultimate disposition of the inheritance.

Marcia persuades Lanning to go up to their camp on Lake Manitou until she has had a chance to go to work on her father. To her consternation, Thayer announces that he intends to go to Manitou himself, taking Owen with him.

**This story began in the Argosy for June 29**



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LUCKILY, Lanning delays leaving New York until the next day, Tuesday. By that time Thayer and Owen have already left. Thayer fails to keep an appointment with Dawson in Albany, and he does not arrive in New York Tuesday night, a fact established by the presence of a process-server seeking him at Grand Central Station.

By Thursday, Marcia is sufficiently worried to consult Hyer; but when she hears that Lanning has been arrested up at Manitou, she tries to call the detective off.

It later develops that Lanning is charged, not with murder as Marcia feared, but with the theft of Dawson's car, which has been discovered at Manitou. Dawson, Hyer, and Marcia decide to go up to the camp the next day and straighten things out.

Meanwhile Dawson tells Hyer that on Thursday he had mailed a large sum of money in cash to Washington, supposedly on Thayer's request, to be called for at General Delivery in the capital by Thayer himself. A friend of Marcia's has seen Rich Lanning in Washington at noon that day, and Hyer is disturbed.

At an interview with Owen, Hyer tells the astrologist about his plan to go to Manitou, guessing that Owen will follow him there. Questioned, Owen denies that he was in Washington on the crucial day, and cagily evades Hyer's attempt to get his fingerprints on a silver cigarette case.

"Dick-shy," Hyer decides. "Probably has a record long as your arm."

HYER'S next step is to enlist the services of freckle-faced ORSON QUICK, formerly captain of bellhops at a Manhattan hotel, now Hyer's imp-brained assistant. Quick is to seek out Owen's professional services and if possible attach himself to the astrologer as general handy-man. Quick is glad to be back in harness again but bitterly regrets the lack of corpses or even bloodshed in the present case. That defect is soon remedied. At Dawson's Hyer is introduced to KARL SANDLUND, former caretaker of the Manitou camp, discharged on Monday night by Nat Thayer at Owen's insistence. He has something to tell Marcia Thayer and will confide in no one else. There is also a little matter of someone having taken a pot-shot at Dawson through the study window a few minutes before Hyer's arrival.

Hyer tips the police that they will probably find the rifle down a manhole a few yards away from Dawson's house. They do; it is a Savage 250 which, as Hyer points out, is a pretty expensive gadget for a prankish kid to be playing around with.

When Hyer arrives at his Greenwich Village flat a little after one, he finds Marcia Thayer waiting for him. As they enter the hallway, Marcia lets out a scream which Hyer promptly stifles with the flat of his hand. Following the girl's gaze, he sees a long and obviously lifeless arm dangling through the balustrade on the first landing. The bony, hairy wrist, the threadbare blue-serge sleeve could belong to no one but Karl Sandlund. . . .

## CHAPTER XII

### CORPSE BEFORE DAYLIGHT

HYER, his hand still clapped over the girl's mouth, had swung her about and was half carrying, half propelling her to the door.

As he dropped his hand for an instant to the knob, she gasped, *"Wait!"*

There was a light smack as Hyer ungallantly closed her lips again.

Angered, Marcia caught at his wrist. They struggled for a moment silently, till her glance slipped loathingly upward and back and she went weak. After that she was quiet as Hyer urged her through the door and down the steps.

He was talking now in a rapid low monotone. He continued to talk as he piloted her across the street to her car, opened the door and all but lifted her in under the wheel.

Then, when Hyer had run lightly around and got in at the other side, Marcia said, "Karl?" in a broken whisper. "It *was* Karl? Karl Sandlund?"

"Get started."

"But what could he—?"

*"Get started!"* furiously.

When they had reached the end of the street and turned right into Greenwich Avenue, Hyer said, "I'll get out here."

She stopped at the curb and looked at him, dazed now, bewildered, color flowing again beneath her pallor. "Karl was looking—for *me?*"

"How long did you park there, across from my house?"

"Fifteen minutes, half an hour—oh, I don't know," she cried. "I can't think."

Hyer stared at her. "But you can drive?"

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She nodded.

"Was Beryl home when you left?"

"No."

"Where had she gone?"

"To the theater."

"The phone call that brought you down here?"

"It came directly to my room. When I'm there alone at night, Regan leaves the switchboard open through my extension."

Hyer studied her a moment. "You're pretty lucky, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" she whispered. She caught her lower lip in her teeth.

"I mean you're going to drive straight home—and pray all the way that Beryl isn't there ahead of you. How about your car?" Hyer asked.

"It was parked in the street. I'm sure no one saw me."

"Well, put it back without anybody seeing you. Go in the back way and get out of your clothes. It'll cost you a long climb, but you owe that to Something."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go back there and see what's happened."

"But it's in front of your door. It—They may suspect you."

"I may have a fancier alibi than you do." He got out and closed the door. "Beat it. You can call me when you get undressed. Then fix the phone so it rings the butler. Do you get that?" When she hesitated, Hyer's round bland face contorted suddenly with fury. "Get out of here. He was looking for you. You don't know who saw you parked there in the street. You want to hang us both?"

AS HE watched her twin taillights whisk away up the broad deserted avenue, the detective's expression hardened. But his stride was brisk when he turned and walked back toward the corner. Only here did he hesitate an instant. Apprehension touched his eyes as he squinted up the deserted reaches of Bank Street past his house.

Absently he ran a forefinger under one jowl. "A fancier one," he muttered. "Well, I *may* have." Then he walked on, his heel-clicks brisk and confident in the frosty hush.

The second-floor light, a bracket midway between the stairhead and Hyer's own door at the front, flashed up as Hyer turned its switch.

On the floor, his massive figure crumpled as if he might have crawled a foot or two after dropping, lay Sandlund.

Hyer knelt and pressed his fingertips beneath the distorted angle of the man's jaw. Then, quickly, he loosened Sandlund's collar, lifted the arm that had dropped, started to pick up the unconscious figure, said, "Oof," as he saw the blood-soaked vest under the left arm, and rose to step across the man's leg and unlock his door.

On the point of lifting Sandlund, he hesitated, bent still lower, and examined the floor closely. There was no sign of a scuffle. But the faint dew of dust that had collected since its polishing the morning before, showed a broad swept swath where the stricken man had inched himself from the corner where he had first fallen.

Hyer stooped, hoisted the limp body with a quick twist to his shoulder. He staggered twice as he made his way into his sitting room.

A radio car arrived ahead of the ambulance. The officer who remained with Hyer was interested in the fact that Hyer knew Sandlund's identity.

"So you saw him earlier tonight, did you?" he asked.

Hyer explained briefly about Dawson's stolen car, his visit to Dawson's Forest Hills home and the instant's encounter with Sandlund there.

The officer made a note. "Maybe we better call Dawson."

Hyer went to the phone. His hand was on the instrument when he said, "Wait a minute. You didn't find a handkerchief with a red border."

The officer stared.

"Didn't find a what?"

"A handkerchief with a red border,"

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Hyer lied. "He had it when I saw him about nine o'clock."

Together they searched Sandlund's pockets thoroughly, turning up nothing that had not already been inventoried: a wadded five-dollar bill, forty-seven cents in change, a return ticket to Big Moose dated the morning before, a bone-handled knife, cigarettes, a polished horse-chestnut, an envelope addressed to Sandlund from Minneapolis and bearing on its back the penciled addresses of three New York employment agencies, and a plain handkerchief greyed from careless launderings.

"That's funny," Hyer said, "I'd have sworn—" At a ring from the telephone he broke off and went to answer it. He said, "Hello. . . . Oh, hello. . . . So Beryl isn't there yet? Well, that's all right. I'm busy tonight now, anyway . . . No, nothing serious. Some chap got knocked out here in the house. I'll have to stay around until he comes to." Hyer listened a moment. "All right, I'll see you in the morning."

Hyer dialed a number, waited a moment, said, "Mr. Dawson? . . . Henry Hyer. Sorry to bother you, but this Sandlund that said he knew something about your car—when did he leave your house? . . . Alone or did he meet somebody, or didn't you watch? . . . Didn't say where he was going? . . . As a matter of fact, he's here on my sofa . . . Shot . . . All right, it won't hurt. We'll— Wait a minute." He cupped the mouthpiece, said to the officer, "Dawson's coming in to see about it. Want him here or at the station?" Into the phone, he said, "Come down to the Charles Street station . . . That's right. I'll be there."

He hung up.

"Funny," the law observed, "how this guy managed to get into the house. No keys or nothing on him."

This minor mystery vanished with its voicing, for the other officer returned just then. "Folks on the top floor, their doorbell rung just a little after twelve. They pushed the button, but nobody came up. That's how he got in."

"Smart, these Swede woodsmen," Hyer observed. He picked up the phone, dialed Owen's number.

In view of the lateness of the hour, there was surprisingly little delay. "This is Mr. Hyer calling Mr. Owen . . . Do you know where I could reach him? . . . No, I wanted to postpone our appointment, that's all. Something has come up that makes it impossible for me to see him tonight, something fairly serious . . . Thank you." He replaced the phone. "All right, I'm ready."

As they went downstairs, one of the officers said suddenly, "Say, where's that red-headed kid of yours, Quick?"

Hyer's nostrils twitched. But his tone was guileless and untroubled when he answered. "As a matter of fact, Quick was the one that did for the big Swede. I put him up to it."

The officer peered at him sharply as they reached the sidewalk. "All right, smart guy," he grumbled.

## CHAPTER XIII

### VISITOR IN THE SMALL HOURS

IT WAS nearly three o'clock when Dawson and Hyer left the Charles Street police station together.

"If you ask me," Dawson said thoughtfully as they got into his car, "those chaps didn't like any too well to let you go."

"Right."

"But that's ridiculous. What reason would you have for wanting Karl out of the way?"

"That's what they're trying to figure out," Hyer answered. His tone was light. "Since he died on the way to the hospital, maybe they can *find* a reason. They're handy that way sometimes." He paused. "But by the time they do—"

"By that time, you'll know the truth—and what happened to Nat?"

"If you're an optimist, yes."

"Look here," Dawson said with sudden spirit, "I want to know where Owen's been tonight."

Under the wash of a streetlight apprehension showed briefly in Hyer's eyes. He said, "That's right. So do I. Let me out

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at the corner here and I'll make a phone call."

But it was his own number he called from the all-night lunch wagon, and when he hung up after letting the phone at the other end ring emptily five times, his round bland face was frankly troubled. He started out to rejoin Dawson, squinted, touched his lip with the tip of his tongue, and went back to the phone, where he called the St. Julian Hotel and asked for Murphy, the house detective.

"Murphy," he said hopefully, "has Orson Quick called you by any chance tonight? . . ." The eagerness in his eyes went out. "No, I just wondered. He's been out on a job and hasn't got in touch with me. It occurred to me he might have left a message with you in case I called. Since he's done that before . . . No, never mind."

"You didn't find him?" Dawson asked as Hyer got back in the car.

Worried, Hyer shook his head.

"By the way, Marcia had a couple of calls from her father tonight."

*"What?"*

"That's what they made out to be."

"Then you think Nat's still alive?"

Hyer said, "I'm not paid to think."

"But you must have some basis to go on."

Hyer's mouth twisted. "Well, there's that shot taken at you tonight."

Dawson said, "Umpf. How did you know the gun was down that manhole?"

"He wouldn't want to carry it very far after the shot. That was the easiest place. It was a guess. Yes," Hyer went on ruefully, "and the way things turned out, maybe it wasn't such a smart guess."

"The police *were* awfully curious back there, weren't they?"

"How did I know somebody was going to mail Sandlund to me in that condition?" There was silence for a time. "Know where we're going, do you?" he asked, as Dawson drew up for a light at Thirty-fourth Street.

"Clearse Owen's," grimly.

Hyer grunted.

"My secretary is going through all Nat's canceled vouchers tonight—Oh, don't be alarmed. I think I handled it very neatly. I pretended I'd had a letter from Nat asking to have five accounts checked on. Owen's was merely one of them. But if he did any fancy tracing of Thayer's signature on those checks Thayer is supposed to have sent from Washington, we'll soon know about it. By the way, it was sporting of you not to say anything about Sandlund's looking for Marcia, keeping her out of this tonight, I mean."

"There wouldn't have been any point in that," Hyer said. "First thing you know, it would have opened this disappearance of her father up like a firecracker."

Dawson thought a moment. "I think we ought to do just that, Hyer," he burst out.

"Why?"

THE big man moved a hand impatiently. "It's been over a week. How long are we going to sit here twiddling our thums?"

"Twiddling our thumbs," Hyer echoed ironically. "Like for instance turning up that gun that shot at you tonight, giving the police a chance to trace it, digging out the checks those ones last Thursday were forged from, proving that Sandlund knows something about Mr. Thayer's disappearance and that somebody wants to keep him from telling you or Marcia or me about it, establishing that somebody (who's fairly at home in the city) decoys him around to my place tonight to get rid of him and smear me in one simple operation, and tricking that somebody into calling up Marcia a second time tonight and pretending to be her dad. Twiddling our thumbs, sure."

Dawson gave a short laugh. "That does sound pretty energetic, but I wasn't aware—" He looked at Hyer, frowned. "What do you mean, tricking?"

Hyer shrugged. "That's another guess. We'll have to wait till we talk to Marcia."

And that about someone's decoying Sandlund to your house?"

"Would he have come to me by himself?"

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Dawson said, "Um."

"That's point number one," Hyer observed. "Point number two is even if he had tried to look me up, it's a thousand to one he wouldn't have known that trick of making somebody else in the house stooge for him and open the door."

Dawson thought this over. "But who did do that, then?"

"Whoever," Hyer said slowly, "was waiting there to let Sandlund in when he showed up and give him that slug in his heart. These Swedes are tough, but they're not that tough, unfortunately."

"But why?"

"I told you," Hyer said testily. "Because Sandlund knows something—because if the police get to looking down their noses at *me*, maybe *I'll* have a little more trouble smelling around to *what* Sandlund knows." In a moment he added grimly, "It wasn't pure altruism that made me keep Marcia out of it—if I did."

After several blocks, Dawson said thoughtfully, "How many people know that you're working on this?"

"You name them."

"Owen. Marcia, Beryl—" He stopped, turned to Hyer frowning. "Great Scott, that narrows it down."

"It would," Hyer agreed. "But it's only half the story. To begin with, there's whomever Owen may have told. Then a couple more people up at Manitou Lake, and—"

"Manitou?"

"Rich Lanning and this ex-housekeeper I get more and more interested in."

"But Rich is in jail. He couldn't have had anything to do with this tonight."

"No, and he couldn't have had anything to do with that money-business in Washington last Thursday, either. But he was *in* Washington."

"How would Rich have known about you?"

"Marcia told him she was coming to me. This ex-housekeeper, Warren—"

"Augusta, yes."

"All right. She phoned Marcia at my place yesterday afternoon to tell her Rich had been locked up. About the only person who doesn't know," the detective concluded ironically, "seems to be Winchell and he'll find out pretty soon. Wait a minute. Park here. I'll walk on."

Puzzled, Dawson obeyed.

"If Owen's at home," Hyer said, "I'll give you the signal. If he's not, I'll come back. This is a better place to watch from than in front of the door." He got out, walked briskly toward the lighted marquee of an apartment house fifty yards away.

ACROSS the broad thoroughfare lay Central Park, its silent dusk pricked here and there by lights. From a distance came the occasional whish of a belated car speeding along the hidden drive. Far across the darkling sweep of the Park, buildings clustered about the Plaza stood out in luminous relief like those twinkling transparencies that in a simpler day were wont to adorn Christmas cards. A cab rushed past, and from the side street a milkman's wagon wheeled into the glistening avenue on a long arc, its rubber tires soundless, the *klop-klop* of its horse's hoofs decorously muted.

Presently Hyer returned and got in.

"He's not home?" Dawson asked.

Hyer shook his head. He took out his cigarette case and settled himself in a corner of the seat. "This is as good a place as any," he said affably, "to—" The cigarette was arrested halfway to his lips.

A limousine had halted in front of the lighted marquee. From it stepped a chauffeur, lean to the point of emaciation in his whipcords. He opened the tonneau door, bent forward as if listening to instructions, inclined his head, closed the door, and walked quickly into the building.

Hyer sat up, absently clicked his lighter into flame. His eyes, as they met Dawson across the flare, had new interest in them.

"Eller," Dawson said. "Beryl's chauffeur."

Hyer was already opening the door. "I'll meet you and Marcia at six. Or if anything happens I can't, I'll call her."

"Where are you going?"

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Hyer grinned. "I don't know."

As he approached the waiting limousine, Eller came out of the building. The chauffeur's shadowed, sunken eyes widened. Hyer said, "Hello, Eller. Mind if I thumb a ride?" He turned, opened the door of the limousine, said genially, "Good evening, Mrs. Thayer—" For an instant his cheery smile faltered. He said, "Well, well, fancy meeting *you* here."

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE NIGHT MOVES ON

MARCIA THAYER said, "Good heavens! You?" Hank gave her an acid look, and said sternly:

"Why aren't you home in bed?"

The young man sitting beside Marcia leaned over and put his hand out. He said, "I'm the reason. You're Mr. Hyer, are you? My name's Lanning."

In the faint light from without, Hyer could see that a two-days growth of stubble shadowed Rich Lanning's hard young jaw, and that his fair curly hair was wind-matted. Rich wore a plaid wool shirt, open at the neck over a V of Basque sweater. A shaft of light falling from the bright marquee showed that his corduroy breeches were mud-spattered.

Hyer, ignoring Rich's outstretched hand, stepped back, sprinted around the rear of the limousine, and hailed Dawson who was just driving past them.

Marcia, who had leaped out and run after Hyer, gasped, "What are you—? Oh, it's Pierre." Then, the quick relief in her voice giving way to anxiety again, she said, "Why did you stop him? Rich—"

"Rich has got no business being in this town tonight," grimly. "Maybe we'll need a character witness or two."

The girl gave him a quick searching look, bit her lip, and turned to walk back to the open door of the car as Dawson stepped to the sidewalk twenty feet away and approached them.

Eller, at a nod from Marcia, got in at his wheel.

Dawson's big ruddy face went blank with amazement when he saw the young man sitting by Marcia. "Rich!" His glance brushed Hyer's, unbelief in his eyes.

Rich Lanning laughed. "I'm not exactly flattered."

"We thought you were—"

"In jail? I was. Oh, I didn't crush out. They opened the door for me about five. Five-fifteen to be exact." Rich grew serious. "Thanks, Pierre, for going to bat for me like that."

"You could," Dawson said slowly, "have showed better judgment."

"So Marcia tells me." There was an instant's strained silence. "Is Karl badly—"

Hyer said, "He's dead."

Marcia cried, "*No!*" and seized his arm.

Rich sat back in his corner of the seat.

"Why are you two looking for Owen?" Hyer asked.

Marcia started as if the question broke through her abstraction with a shock. But before she could speak, Rich said quietly, "We want to know where Beryl is."

Hyer squinted at him. "By the way, you didn't steal another car to get down here in, did you?" He climbed inside with Dawson following.

"Rich borrowed Augusta's car," Marcia said. Her explanation was constrained, awkward. Then, as if to break this, she leaned forward quickly, said into the speaking tube, "All right, Eller. We'll all go on."

AS THEY moved away from the curb, gathered speed down the empty avenue, Hyer twisted on the auxiliary seat and looked at Marcia, his eyebrows lifting. "You're one up on Dawson and me. We were going to have to wait for him."

"For whom?"

"I'll give you three guesses."

Her tension relaxed and she answered his smile. "Eller knows another place where he might be." In a lower voice, she added, "Eller has taken Beryl there several times."

"Isn't that fine." Hyer checked the question he was on the point of asking Rich. "I've seen chaps," he said, "who could be

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johnny-on-the-spot, but you're high man so far."

Rich chuckled shortly. "Up until tonight, I've had help. But that's all right. I'll tell you about it when we've had a chance to talk to Clearse Owen."

Hyer shook his head. "Maybe we won't see him. What's wrong with now?"

"We mustn't get mixed up in side issues," Rich said.

"For instance—Washington?"

Marcia, her face white, caught Hyer's glance in a flash of streetlight. Her eyes were furious.

Dawson said, "Washington?" in astonishment. "Were you in Washington, Rich?"

Rich said, "Right," without expression.

"When?" Dawson demanded.

"Ask our deductive friend." Rich's voice was bitter. He took out his pipe and tobacco pouch. He filled the pipe. As he struck a match he said quietly, "I went to Washington, Mr. Hyer, because Mr. Thayer had telephoned me and asked me to meet him there." In the flare of the match his candid gray eyes were clear, unabashed.

Marcia gasped. Dawson said, "When, Rich?"

"Tuesday night. He called me at Augusta's—at the Lake. He asked me to meet him in Washington Thursday afternoon. In the Mayflower lobby."

"Are you sure it was Dad, Rich?" Marcia broke in desperately.

Hyer saw Rich look at her, and it was as if the young man's assurance stumbled for an instant before the grief and weariness in her eyes. "No," Rich said softly. "I'm not sure it was, dear. That's why I did what I did afterward." Though the statement was an answer to Marcia's question, it was Hyer that Rich addressed.

"When did this call come?" Hyer asked.

"About nine o'clock Tuesday night."

"Who knew you were there?"

Rich hesitated. "That afternoon I had run into one of Owen's men—one of his 'physicists' from the observatory. We had a few words," he added shortly.

Hyer said, "All right, what did you do afterward?"

"I'll come to that. Tuesday night, there was a very bad connection. I could barely hear. Something about his being sorry he had not been able to see me that morning at Big Moose—"

"Something about *what?*" Hyer said sharply.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Dawson said slowly, "I hadn't mentioned that, Rich."

"Then you didn't know I had already arranged to meet him Tuesday morning at Big Moose?" Rich asked Hyer.

"Nobody," Hyer said with asperity, "ever tells me anything. No. I knew that you went up there hoping to see him. I didn't know you had a date with him."

Rich nodded. "I had talked to him Monday night from Pierre's."

"Go on," Hyer said grimly.

Marcia was staring out the window.

"The connection was terrible, a constant clicking—"

"Sure," Hyer said impatiently.

"Well?"

THE detective took a pencil from his pocket and reached for the mouthpiece of the speaking tube. "Like this?" he asked. Holding the speaking tube to his lips like a telephone transmitter, he made the pencil point a light rhythmic clapper against its edge.

Marcia, who had been watching, fascinated, turned and looked anxiously at Rich.

Rich nodded. "That was it. That hadn't occurred to me."

Hyer, mollified, replaced the speaker. "If it's done just right," he said cheerfully, "it sounds just like a bad selector in the circuit. It's a good trick to know. Easier than trying to disguise your voice too much. All right."

"I got suspicious," Rich confessed. "Oh, not that night. Later. After I was on the way. In fact, I was almost to Washington Thursday noon before it began to clear up for me. Marcia had called Wednesday

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and said her father hadn't come home, so I knew that, of course. Then it finally penetrated my thick head that a mysterious phone call and a mysterious appointment weren't the sort of thing you'd expect from Mr. Thayer."

Marcia said, "Of course not."

"What did you do when you got to Washington?" Hyer put in.

Rich hesitated. "Look here," he said, puzzled, "how did you know I was *in* Washington?"

Marcia, her voice strained, said, "Janet Kane saw you, Rich."

In the swift gleam of a passing light, Hyer saw Rich's mouth twist ironically. "Was she the only one?"

"So far as we know," Hyer answered.

"Well, I'd been told to go to the Mayflower and meet Mr. Thayer in the lobby. I suppose you can give me a reason?"

"I suppose we can," Hyer agreed.

"What?"

"So that you'd be *sure* to be seen. Somebody else—somebody you know in Washington—had been told to be in the Mayflower lobby, too. Perhaps several somebodies. If we can find out who, it may help. Well?"

"I didn't go to the Mayflower. Instead, I— Wait a minute. You sound as if you know something about all this."

"We do, Rich," Dawson said quietly. He told of the checks he had cashed Thursday morning, of how he had sent the currency to Washington on the strength of a telephone call not unlike Rich's. "Someone," he ended, "forged Nat's name and got that money Thursday afternoon at the post office in Washington." There was a brief awkward silence. "And," Dawson added reluctantly, "there seems to be some possibility, Rich, that that was your money." At Rich's startled exclamation, he told, as Marcia had to Hyer, how the astrologer had persuaded Nathaniel Thayer to liquidate part of Rich's estate in preparation for a new investment.

Hyer, who had been staring out the window, turned and looked at Rich. The young man's face was set, rigid.

"Then perhaps," Rich said, and his voice was burred with strain, "it's as well I *didn't* go to the Mayflower."

"What did you do?" Dawson asked.

"I STOPPED at a small hotel not far from the station and called the Mayflower every fifteen minutes to have Mr. Thayer paged. When he hadn't showed up at seven o'clock, I felt pretty certain the whole thing was a decoy. So I went back to Manitou Lake to think it over. I thought Gussie Warren was the only one who knew where I'd been."

"Why didn't you tell me, Rich?" Marcia asked.

"Sweet, I wanted to do some poking about on my own hook first. And before I'd had a chance to do much poking," he went on to Hyer, "a personable young state trooper called MacKinnon came around and threw me in jail—"

"For stealing a car," Marcia said hotly. Then, in alarm, "You didn't tell Mac anything about Washington, did—?"

"MacKinnon, darling, is an ingenious chap who can put two and two together with the greatest of ease. In the case of Pierre's car, I'm lucky enough to have a hole-ace, my Pullman stub showing I went up to the Lake by train Monday night."

"Got it with you?" Hyer asked casually.

"No."

"But you can put your finger on it?"

"Whenever I want to."

"It's up at the Lake, I suppose?"

Rich laughed. "Yes, it's up at the Lake. It's in Gussie's cottage—"

"Gussie?"

"Augusta Warren, Dad's old housekeeper," Marcia said quickly. "You didn't give it to Gussie, Rich?"

"Gussie knows nothing about it. It's in the top drawer under the lid of her Governor Winthrop desk, the old one in the bedroom. I don't think Gussie even knows that drawer exists. It's got a masked front, under a strip of moulding."

"Then the stub's safe, I guess," Hyer said.

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"As for the Washington trip," Rich went on after a moment, "I'm not so— Well, all I know is that the phone call Tuesday night was from New York. But it's very unlikely that the operator up there listened in and could verify my story. So, if it turns out that there is a good reason—and there apparently is—why I *shouldn't* have been in Washington Thursday afternoon, there's only my frail word that I didn't go down there spontaneously and with malicious intent, and I think it is highly desirable that we all have a cozy little interview with Clearse Owen. Those in favor of the motion signify by the usual sign." His tone was light, amused, but the amusement imperfectly masked an undercurrent of severe strain.

"Rich," Dawson put in anxiously, "it's foolish to let Owen know you're in New York tonight. The best thing you can do—"

"The best thing I can do," grimly, "is have some things out with Owen. We had a session a week ago in front of The Organdy Club. It didn't get either of us very far. Who do you think planted your car up there to throw suspicion on me?" Rich demanded angrily. "Who do you think decoyed me to Washington?"

Hyer looked over his shoulder at Dawson. The big man nodded. "If those checks don't show up in the morning," he said softly, "I'll buy you a dinner."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE VOICE OF NEPTUNE

IN THE rhythmic rise and fall of the passing streetlights, Hyer could see that Marcia's face was drawn, her lips pale. Some of that tension, indeed, had communicated itself to Hyer. He faced about and stared at the back of the chauffeur's head, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

Save for a few questions on the part of Dawson and Rich's brief answers, they rode in silence. The state police had released him six hours after taking him into custody and he had left for the city at once, driving straight through.

"When I found he was going to look up Owen, I insisted on going along," Marcia said with spirit. Then, her tone half apology, half annoyance, she added, "I tried to get in touch with you, Mr. Hyer." She hesitated, and in a rush added. "I had another call from Dad."

Hyer felt Dawson's knee nudge him. Without turning his head the detective asked, "What did he say? As a matter of fact, what did he say the first time?"

"I could scarcely understand him," Marcia said in a suppresed voice. "He sounded worried, choked. He seemed to be wanting to warn me about something. The first time he spoke of Neptune—Neptune in Aquarius—that's all that I can remember, Mr. Hyer. But he sounded—he sounded—" She broke off with a sob.

Hyer turned.

Rich's arm was about Marcia. He had drawn her head to his shoulder.

Hyer, catching Rich's eyes at that instant, saw a fierce determination in them.

"Let her alone, can't you?" Rich said angrily.

No one spoke again.

They sped across Queensborough Bridge, its iron-bound vista silent and deserted save for creeping files of produce and milk trucks in the outermost of the five broad lanes. In Queens Plaza they struck off northward, gathering speed steadily. Hyer, on whose nerves wheeled speed had approximately the effect of a light but remorseless electric charge, gripped the robe rail and stole an anguished glance over Eller's shoulder at the speedometer. His grip tightened convulsively and he slumped back.

They swung into a side street on complaining tires, screeched and swerved a block later as a milk wagon came in from the right, and sped on through a section of closely hunched brick flats which grew steadily less assuming with every block that flashed past. At length, some time after they had crossed the Parkway, the massed houses, frame and rickety by now, petered out altogether, and their way led between open, rubbish-heaped lots.

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Suddenly pavement gave place to rough cinders and at that instant a grove of trees closed in about them.

As their speed fell off and his stretched nerves relaxed, Hyer, computing swiftly, reckoned they were somewhere in the vicinity of Bowery Bay. A moment later a hoarse hoot of a tug gave this partial verification.

Eller was now driving slowly. In the jolting headlight beams the rutted road showed unkempt and forbidding. Ragged bushes pushed in on either side, and the roadway itself was littered here and there with refuse. A rat, sleek and furry as a young opossum, darted across their way.

An instant later the ranker undergrowth on their right opened to show a track leading up a sharp incline amongst trees. Up this they bumped, headlights shooting eerily through budding boughs, and came to rest at length in a cleared space. The corner of a shingled building protruded from behind a massed thicket of lilacs.

The lights went off, the motor died, and darkness and silence enveloped them.

ELLER slid back the glass partition and said guardedly, "I think you may find him here, miss."

Marcia leaned forward. "Here?"

Eller nodded slowly.

"I have brought Mrs. Thayer here several times."

Hyer tried vainly to identify an overtone in the man's calm statement, to link it with the fury of his driving. From the moment before they had set out, when Hyer had been paying scant attention to Eller, he had not seen the chauffeur's face. Was it vengeance, fear, or merely an overtaxed neurosis plaguing Eller?

A glance at his cowled eyes, his thin monkish face, might have given the answer, but even after the blinding interval that followed the lights, vision was still insecure, and though Eller had turned and was facing them over his shoulder, his expression was indistinct.

"What did she do here, for heaven's sake?" Dawson demanded.

"I can't say, sir. Only that Mr. Owen was here."

"Well, we can find out," Rich said. The door on his side clicked open.

"Wait, wait," Marcia pleaded.

In the darkness, Hyer felt her lithe fingers close about his.

"Come on," Rich said.

"How could this be the place, Eller?" Marcia said. Then to Hyer, "What could he be doing here?"

"I'm sure I don't know, miss," Eller answered. "But this is the place. I am certain of that."

"But you must be mistaken. It's so—so dark. There aren't any lights."

"There are *never* any lights, miss."

Vengeance, Hyer thought. It was vengeance, all right. But why? The man's voice trembled, and low, guarded as it was, it had an almost falsetto edge of strain.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Rich said impatiently.

"Eller," Dawson said, "if you have—"

"This is quite the place, sir," Eller broke in.

*"Listen!"* Marcia whispered.

Through the silence, whose very depth bespoke desertion and decay, they heard a sound, a human sound, a sound merging so aptly into the desolation of the place, the hour, that it might have been a trick of imagination. Somewhere within dead walls to their right, a woman was weeping.

Hyer said, "Stay here." Then to Dawson, "Keep 'em here, will you?"

Marcia's fingers tightened over his for an instant and then released.

Hyer stepped out. Behind him, he heard Eller's excited whisper, "The house is there, straight ahead," and could all but see the flush in the man's narrow face, the glitter in his shadowed eyes as he leaned forward with this eager message.

It was unnecessary.

At that instant a door creaked and the weeping was abruptly louder. There were swift steps echoing emptily on a narrow board porch and the sobs grew fainter.

For ten yards Hyer ran blindly, bumbling through thickets, ricocheting from

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invisible trunks. Then there was a sudden crashing directly in front of him and he collided solidly with another man.

THEY grappled, and with an expertly outflung foot Hyer sent the newcomer sprawling, landing on him with a grunt. A flying fist caught him accurately on the point of his chin and a private set of constellations whirled about him. Hyer grunted again and made a fitting observation.

The figure below him went limp and a voice said, "Well, for the lovva—*Hank!*"

Hyer said, "You shrimp! Sock *me*, will you?"

"How'd I know it was you?"

A crashing approached from the direction of the car.

Hyer said, "Dawson."

"Here."

"*Get back in that car, damn it.* Keep them in it. There's only one here. I can handle him."

"That's what you think," the figure beneath him muttered.

"Rich got out," Dawson called guardedly. "Isn't he there with you?"

Hyer swore softly. "Get back with that girl," he ordered. "We'll get him later." As the other man withdrew, Hyer bent forward over his prostrate opponent.

In the cupped glow of a cigarette lighter, Orson Quick stared up resentfully, righteous wrath tinting his angular freckled face the color of his wiry red hair. "If you hadn't wished that operation on me," he growled, "you'd never got me on my back like this."

"And you're going to stay on your back until I know what in the name of—Where've you been?"

A grin eased the fury in Quick's greenish eyes. "Be careful, mister," he said ominously. "You don't know who you're talking to."

Hyer grunted. "Who?"

"You are talking," Quick said, "to Clearse Owen's bodyguard."

Hyer's lighter went out. He sat back. This was a tactical mistake. With a twist, Quick dislodged him, and an instant later the boy was astride Hyer's midriff, pinioning the detective's wrists above his head.

But after his one animal reaction, Hyer made no struggle. He said, "Pssst." Then, as Quick bent forward, "Is Owen here? All right, who was the woman?"

"I don't know."

"Get after her and find out. We'll have a scuffle and you can get away from me."

Quick sat back, braced his heels, and with a smoothly timed spring and tug brought both of them to their feet. For an instant they struggled, crashing in the undergrowth.

"What operation?" Hyer panted.

The boy's knuckles dug playfully into his employer's scalp. "See you later, pal."

This time it was Hyer's turn to trip backward over a hooked heel and land sprawling on the sod as Quick bolted away.

Just then a door was flung open in the invisible house and light streamed out.

"What's going on out there?" a voice bellowed.

## CHAPTER XVI

### STARS OUT OF THEIR COURSES

HYER, his good nature somewhat frayed from Quick's literal rendering of his order, got to his feet grumbling, and brushed himself off.

"Who's out there?" Clearse Owen shouted from within the lighted hall. The astrologer still had not shown himself.

Hyer said, "Only us chipmonks," in disgust, and started toward the open door.

"Who?"

Hyer said, "Hyer."

Owen appeared in the doorway, huge, solid, his broad shoulders and haycock of black mane giving him a truly formidable silhouette. He said, "Hyer?" in amazement, and gave a bellowing laugh. "Well, this *is* a surprise!" He crossed the narrow, sagging porch, his hand outstretched. "My dear fellow, what's happened to you? You've been groveling."

"I ran into one of your thugs—a kid

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with red hair. I'd have taken him, too," Hyer said irritably, "only he—"

Owen's laugh boomed again. "One of my thugs? Tut, tut. Merely a houseboy."

"Then why don't you keep him in the house?"

Owen grasped the detective's hand and drew him up on the porch. "You do get about, don't you? How did you find your way here?"

Hyer said, "It's the Sioux in me."

"Ah, traveling alone then?"

"Thanks, I came with a party." He turned, called, "Dawson, you folks want to come in, too?"

Clearse Owen's rumbling laughter died abruptly. "So Dawson piloted you to my little Walden, did he?"

Hyer said, "No." They had come into the light now, and he could see that the big man's swarthy face was once more amused, but more quietly, something of the earlier robust quality clearly missing. Owen's eyes, under their tufted black brows, were wary.

The astrologer said, "Oh," as they heard voices. His white teeth showed in a tolerant smile. "So it was Marcia."

Hyer said, "You can have as many guesses as you want," and walked on across the threshold as Owen turned back to greet Dawson and Marcia.

The hallway was noteworthy in no particular. Plain, barren of adornment or furniture save for a simple settle with a hinged seat, and a cherrywood table; it was but the entrance to a house, once substantial, now in the first reaches of a slow decay, a house dating apparently from the more drab decades of the nineteenth century when taste was poised on a nerveless norm before sliding off into flamboyance.

At the right, a plain uncarpeted stairway ascended to the floor above. The space under the stairs was used apparently as a closet. Opposite the door to this was another, ajar, which Hyer pushed open as Marcia and Dawson reached the porch.

He had just time enough to drop his hat over a wallet that lay on the cherrywood table. When he picked the hat up again, he neatly palmed the wallet.

"Awfully nice to have you people drop in like this," Owen was saying heartily as he ushered Marcia and Dawson into the sitting room. "We're a little off the beaten path here and we don't have many visitors." At this he laughed loudly and clapped Dawson on the shoulder.

The formality of his dinner jacket and glistening white shirtfront contrasted oddly with the plainness of his setting.

Hyer said, "Eller wasn't sure you'd be here," and was rewarded for his shot by the merest echo of the wariness which Owen had shown a few moments earlier.

"Always at home to my friends," Owen protested. "Sit down. Have a drink." He frowned. "What's the matter? Something happen?"

Before either of the men could speak, Marcia said, "Several things have happened, Mr. Owen. We've come to you for —advice."

"Splendid. Splendid. Only too glad to—"

"Rich was arrested yesterday afternoon and charged with stealing Mr. Dawson's car."

"And someone," Dawson said, "tried to kill me through my study window this evening."

Hyer saw Marcia's start of amazement, instantly controlled.

"And someone," she said calmly, "murdered Karl Sandlund in front of Mr. Hyer's door."

Owen looked from one to the other of the trio, his swarthy face blank. Then his eyes crinkled as he stared at Hyer. "Come now," he said jovially. "This is a little *too* thick, isn't it? You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"And," Marcia said, "my father telephoned me tonight. Twice."

Hyer, watching Owen intently, saw the quiet wary look reappear in the astrologer's eyes.

Owen was, perhaps, just a shade too long in turning to face Marcia. He said quietly, the boisterousness gone now from

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his manner, "I'm awfully glad to hear that, Marcia."

"Only it was not my father!" Her mouth trembled and tears showed in her eyes. "It was not my father. It was some cruel, ghastly joke. It wasn't—my father—at all," she cried, her voice rising till it broke in a sob. She stared at Owen and whispered, "My father is—dead." She dropped to a chair, her face working, one gloved hand clenched in her lap, the other beating the cushion.

DAWSON knelt beside her chair and put his arms about her quivering shoulders. But she pushed it away at once and sat up, rigid, white, her eyes burning.

"It was not my father," she repeated hoarsely, and now her voice was controlled. "It was someone—*something* else. It was part of the hideous game you've been playing on my father, and on Beryl and Rich and me."

Owen sat down slowly, stared hard at the girl, then looked quickly at Hyer and away.

Somewhere in the house a door slammed with such force that a tremor ran through the walls.

"My father was kind, intelligent," Marcia went on in a low tone, her words shaken with the intensity of her grief and confusion. "You did something to him. From the first day he knew you, he was changed. In his way, he was a scientist, an honest intelligent scientist. He loved astronomy. You played on that love and made it something vile and mean. Just as you had taken Beryl's childish absurdities and made them mean and petty. I know why Beryl hates you," she said passionately. "I know why she—why she—" Her voice dropped to a whisper and broke.

Owen was staring at her, his black eyes brilliant, the faintest lift of a smile at the corner of his full red mouth, his swarthy features immobile.

The house was utterly silent. In the distance a tug lowed once but mantling walls and the room's taut stillness filtered reality from the sound, leaving it eerie and vague.

*"But—do I know?"* Marcia whispered. *"Can any of us know?"*

Fear and loathing showed suddenly in her eyes, and she shrank back against Dawson's arm, caught his hand, her breath coming fast, her lips trembling.

Still the astrologer had not moved.

"You were the last man to see my father," Marcia said bitterly. "You had Sandlund discharged. You—" Her voice rose. "You hate Rich."

Quick appeared in the door. To the astrologer he said, "I've got to see you a minute."

Owen's shoulders had twitched as with a shock that snapped some straining concentration. He rose, frowning, murmured, "Sorry," and went to the door. In the hall he and the boy talked in low tones for a moment.

Then Quick ran out and across the porch and Owen returned. He was at ease once more and the remnant of a smile was just disappearing from his mouth.

HE STOOD for an instant and looked regretfully at the girl. "Marcia," he said in a quiet voice, "that is not true. I do not hate Lanning."

"But you *do!*" The passion trembling in her voice quickened her eyes. "You've done everything to discredit him with Dad." She stopped, caught her lip in her teeth. "And you decoyed Rich to Washington last Thursday," she said hoarsely.

An angry flush rose in Owen's dark face. He said, "Washington again. Look here, I—" He caught himself, softened his tone. "Just what *is* this business about Washington? I believe you mentioned it yesterday afternoon, Hyer."

"Thursday morning," Dawson answered, "I cashed two checks for Mr. Thayer and, on what I took to be his own instructions, sent the money to Washington. Those checks were forgeries. Someone got the money in Washington Thursday afternoon."

Owen said, "Oh." He laughed. "And you're going to accuse *me* of forgery?" Once more he checked himself. "You say

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Rich was in Washington that afternoon?" he asked quietly, turning to Hyer.

Hyer said, "What do you think?"

Owen hesitated. "Frankly, Hyer, I think the best possible thing under the circumstances is for all of you people to try to understand Lanning." He started to explain something about the way Rich and the stars were disagreeing right now.

Marcia drew a quick breath and her slim shoulders twitched. To Hyer she said, "I'm sorry. I can't stand this tonight." Then mastering herself, but without looking at Owen, "You know nothing about Pierre's car?"

"Only what you have told me, Marcia."

"And the checks," she rushed on, still not looking at him, but staring at Hyer as if for support, "and the money in Washington? Or what happened to—*my father?*"

There was another silence. This time it was Owen who looked away from the girl's hot questing eyes. The astrologer seemed to be struggling against a great reluctance. His glance strayed back. Marcia held it without flinching, but her mouth tightened and color leaped higher in her cheeks.

"Yes," Owen said, speaking so low that Hyer, at the side of the room, could scarcely hear, "I do know—something."

Marcia took a step toward him, one clenched hand on her breast, her lips parted.

"On a train," Owen murmured. "On a train for Utica last Tuesday morning were two men. One of those men had been caretaker at Manitou Lake, the other was a cook. One of those men—"

"Was Karl Sandlund," Marcia cried. "You told Beryl he would die. He died—tonight."

Owen's eyes changed, as if a film of caution were swiftly drawn between him and the three in the room.

"Do you mean that Jean will die, too?" Marcia asked hoarsely. "Jean, the cook?"

Owen had risen. "In the last lunation chart I prepared for your father, Marcia—"

Marcia gave a choked cry and ran out of the room. They heard her stumble at the edge of the porch.

SHE was white and silent as they started back to Manhattan. Not until they had gone a mile did she say suddenly in a brittle unsteady whisper, *"That man!* I could feel his hands. I could—" She stopped, shuddered, and sank against Dawson as his arm went about her twitching shoulders.

"It mightn't have been so bad, only once I had heard him—with Beryl. A long time ago. *You* couldn't feel it, you two. You're lucky. You don't know how lucky you are to have a different set of gears." She gave a quick strained laugh, started to speak again, and could not for the chattering of her teeth.

Presently she sat up, tense. As they waited for a light, she struck the window with her knuckles. "But *why* would Rich have gone on without waiting for us? Eller," she called, leaning forward.

"Yes, miss."

"Just what did Rich say?"

"He came back to the car, miss, shortly after you had gone into the house. He said he was going back, for you not to wait for him, that he would be all right."

"But what did he *say?*"

"You mean his own words, miss?"

"Yes."

"As nearly as I can recall, he said, 'Tell them not to wait for me, Eller. I'm going on. I'll probably drive right on back to the Lake.'" After a moment Eller said, "There was something else, Miss."

"Yes?" eagerly.

"Mr. Lanning asked us not to mention that we had seen him tonight."

Several minutes passed. Then Marcia said in a low bitter voice, "Well, I've been the world's prize fool. I showed Clearse Owen every card in our hand and behaved like a seventh grader."

"You didn't do so badly," Hyer put in.

Marcia said, "Thanks," shortly.

"I mean it. You did about as well," Hyer said candidly, "as I could have hoped

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to do myelf. You saved me a lot of trouble."

"What did I do?"

"You didn't see it? Either of you?"

Marcia seized Hyer's arm. "You mean from something I said?"

"From something you said. Bright girl. You'll find those checks," Hyer said to Dawson. "The ones the secretary's looking for tonight."

"Then the two last Thursday were forgeries?" Marcia cried.

Hyer said, "That's right."

"You *know* it? From something said tonight?"

"I know it—from something said tonight. The next thing," Hyer said, "is that I get more and more curious to see this place up in the mountains."

Dawson put in: "You've got something to go on?"

Hyer nodded. "It isn't much yet—but it's something." In his coat-pocket, the back of his hand smarted furiously. But to offset this, was the smooth pin-seal wallet his fingers caressed, the wallet from Owen's hall table, the wallet that bore, in chaste gold letters, the initials *N.T.*

## CHAPTER XVII

### STARS FALL ON HENRY HYER

SINCE it was then after three, and they had agreed to start for the mountains at six, Marcia's invitation to Hyer and Dawson that they spend the rest of the night in guest chambers at the Thayer menage met with only the most formal resistance.

"There's plenty of room," the girl explained, "and if we run into Beryl—well, she'll know all about what we've been doing tonight anyway." With a forefinger she jabbed meaningfully in the direction of Eller's back. "So why be hung for a lamb?"

The quip was without humor, and that very fact lent force to her suggestion. There had been a deep and unconcealed eagerness in her words, as if she could not bear the thought of leaving them and going on alone with her freshening grief, her fears for Rich, and all the other murky and ominous hints that surrounded her.

Hyer, touched despite himself, said lightly, "All right. We'll match, Dawson, to see who buys the toothbrushes." He saw a smile quiver at the corner of Marcia's lips. A little later he said, "So you think Beryl will know all about it, do you?" and pointed at Eller's back.

"I shouldn't be surprised. She manages to find out anything she wants to." Marcia hesitated. "I wonder where she'd been tonight."

Dawson said, "So do I. By Jove, Hyer, you don't think something's happened to Beryl, too, do you?"

Hyer said, "You never can tell. No," he added quickly, "I don't think anything's happened to Beryl."

As they rode, he stared at the silent chauffeur and owned himself puzzled. The man's thin, lined face and haunted eyes betokened a tragedy of no little depth in some niche of his own past. The passion that had gripped him as he led them to Clearse Owen's retreat had given Hyer to wonder if the tragedy might be connected in some fashion with Owen.

But when they had rejoined the chauffeur after leaving Owen, he had withdrawn once more behind those shadowed defenses, and he might have been picking them up at the opera or the theater for all the interest he showed in the place they had quitted.

This inflexible reserve which Eller had assumed like a mask, extended even to his driving which was decorous, skilful—and by that token a definite relief to Hyer. Now Marcia hinted at more than an occupational entente between Eller and her stepmother, and Hyer found himself once more bemused.

They sped under elevated tracks, slowed to let a larruping newspaper truck hurtle past, and angled into the long straightaway which shelved insensibly upward to stalk across the flats on its high, slim pilasters and become the approach to Triborough Bridge. On the right the stumpy

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arch of Hell Gate stood out against the false dawn; to their left lay the City, gently murmurous, its distant midtown pinnacles hinted at in the occasional pinpoints of light against the night's backdrop, here and there an illumined tower.

No one of the three spoke again until after they had turned into Gracie Square and were approaching the squat, grotto-like entrance of the carriageway at the end house.

But just before Eller guided them in between the low square pillars, Hyer turned and stared back through the rear window.

"What's the matter?" Marcia said sharply. "What did you see?"

Hyer grinned amiably. "Toothbrushes. We forgot all about 'em. I see there's a drugstore back there on the corner. I'll run back and—"

"Oh no. We'll send Eller."

"Let a chauffeur pick out my toothbrush? I should say not!"

Dawson laughed. "I'm not that fussy. I'll match you, Hyer."

The detective waved his hand. "That's all right. I need the walk. Take a constitutional before I go to bed every night."

Marcia looked at him suspiciously. "A walk? Two blocks?"

"I may take a jog around the reservoir."

"I know," she said in a low tone. "You want to telephone. That's all right. There's a private wire in Dad's study upstairs."

Hyer said, "Bright girl," and patted the hand she had unconsciously laid on his arm. "You two take care of each other. I'll be right back." He stepped out the opposite side as the watchman opened the door for Marcia and Dawson. "See you upstairs." He straightened his shoulders, drew a deep breath of the crisp morning air, and strolled back toward the entrance of the carriageway.

HERE he paused to light a cigarette and make sure that Marcia and Dawson had entered the building. Then with a mild light of anticipation in his eyes, he stepped out to the street, walked across to the opposite sidewalk, and turned west.

Midway to the avenue corner, a coupé was parked, its rosy taillights suggesting it to be occupied.

This last was indeed the case, for as Hyer strolled up quietly and paused just abaft the coupe's beam, Beryl was saying rapidly, impassionately, "So you *are* Taurus. I could tell the moment I saw you that you were one of those creatures of contradiction. You're stubborn, aren't you, yet you'll yield at once to the slightest word of love. You're earthbound and inclined to be hard, cruel yet gentle as a lamb. Born on May first? Oh. Then you have definite inclinations toward art and music, haven't you? And your One, if you have any assistance at all from Three— I wonder," Beryl said musingly, "just what you *do* know about yourself."

Orson Quick said, "Ma'am?" politely.

"This is a very critical period in your life, young man. A *crucial* period. Some great change is indicated. How long have you worked for Clearse Owen, young man?"

"Ma'am?"

"How long have you worked for Clearse Owen?"

"Since yesterday, ma'am."

"Yesterday?" sharply. "What *time* yesterday? Think! What time?"

"Quick, after an interval appropriate to thought, said, "About ten o'clock, ma'am,"

"Yesterday morning?"

"No'm, last night."

"Ten o'clock," Beryl murmured. "Monday night. Moon in Capricorn trine Neptune— No, that was— Moon square mercury at ten-eighteen. *Clearse Owen?"* she demanded aghast, *"hired you at ten o'clock last night?"*

"Yes'm."

"Why, that's—that's *criminal.* The man must have been— But I always said he was a fraud," furiously.

Quick said, "Wait a minute," in an indignant tone.

"I know. You Taurus people are *so* loyal. But you shouldn't have let him—

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That is, just at that hour— After all, what did you *know* about Clearse Owen? Oh dear," in dismay, "and tomorrow Jupiter enters Aries. You must be ever so careful. Many people will try to mislead you, use you for their own selfish purposes. You must not trust those with whom you work. Let *me* be your friend, won't you? Let *me*—help you."

"Help me, ma'am?"

"During all this critical time," Beryl continued, and her voice was low, reverent, "you will, of course, be under the influence of Uranus, and he will help you strengthen your ideals. I can tell you are a person of great strength of character. Don't let anyone touch *that,*" she pleaded. "It is more priceless than rubies." She hesitated, said tensely, "It is going to be a dangerous time for all of us. Perhaps we can help each other, you and I."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be glad to do anything I can."

"You'll come to *me,* if—if you're in trouble? Of course," with a short laugh, "I'm only an amateur, but I'm sure that between us we can—"

"Yes'm, I'm sure we can."

Beryl said brightly, "Shall we keep this a secret, just between the two of—?"

HYER'S chuckle, as he appeared at the coupé's open window, brought Orson Quick whirling about, his greenish eyes fierce, jaw jutting.

Beryl Hawtrey Harnett Thayer, leaning on the wheel, gave a violent start, and her restless hazel eyes widened in amazement. Nervously she caught her sable jacket about her throat. "Why, Mr. Hines," she said icily, "You might have the courtesy to—to rap."

Hyer chuckled again. "Sorry. I've got to talk to this guy."

Beryl, affronted, opened the door, got out. "I wouldn't *think* of interfering with your professional duties," she said with frigid courtesy, and fled toward the carriageway.

Quick's face was crimson as he turned to his employer. He muttered "Ixnay on the iddingkay."

"So she hates Owen enough to want to line up his help, does she?" Hyer observed. "Well, that may be useful. She *was* the one out there in Queens, was she?"

Quick nodded. "She was the one, all right. Had her car parked in on a stub street about two hundred yards away."

"And you stepped up politely and introduced yourself to help her in?"

Quick colored. "Well, I couldn't help it. I wasn't cut out to be a Daniel Boone. I tripped over a damn oil stove. You told me to chase after her and see who it was. She invited me to come along."

"Why did—?"

"Listen." The boy's mouth twisted. "She pulled a gun on me."

Hyer whistled. "Think of that."

Quick shrugged. "I don't know how she tied me up with Owen. Lots of things about her I don't know. She acts awful screwy, but— Well, I don't know."

"Do you know when she came?"

"About twenty minutes before you got there."

"Why was she crying?"

"I don't know."

"Go on."

"Well, anyway after she saw who it was when she pulled the gun, she seemed embarrassed and apologized. Told me she was all shaky and upset and asked if I'd see her home. I said that was all right with me, but I'd have to ask Owen. I could tell she didn't like that idea, but she gave in finally. So I went back and put it up to Owen. Boy, does *he* hate her guts."

"How did you get tied up with Owen, anyway?" Hyer asked curiously.

QUICK grinned. "You're kind of touchy with your own professional secrets, *Mister* Hyer. Maybe I ought to be allowed a couple. Anyway, you'd said to shine up to Owen and the maid—"

"Unh-hunh," Hyer said quickly.

"Skip it. Well, when I got back to the car, there was this other guy there—that's right, her nephew, Lanning. He and Beryl

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were having some sort of serious huddle, and I thought maybe she'd go back on what she'd fixed up with me. But not at all. She even introduced me to Lanning. Nice guy," Quick mused, "and mighty worried about something if you—"

"What did you hear?" Hyer asked eagerly.

Quick shrugged. "Not a word. He went off a little bit, and Beryl and I sat in the car and waited. Then he came back and we drove right back here lickety split."

"Wait a minute. Do you mean she drove all the way here without saying anything."

"You get it," the boy said.

"What happened then?"

"Lanning got out, said goodbye—yes, that's all—and got in a muddy roadster and lit out."

Hyer said, "What else?"

Quick grimaced. "Then, she started to work on me. We'd just got going good when you showed up."

After a minute Hyer said, "Why did Owen let you go with her?"

"You take the thoughts right out of my head," Quick agreed. "By the way, she stopped once. In a drugstore. Yeah, to make a phone call. I went in to get some cigarettes, but the booth was away at the back and I couldn't hear anything."

"What was she doing at Owen's?"

"I don't know. Owen and me are going to fly up to Manitou Lake in the morning."

Hyer grunted.

"Hank," the boy asked hesitantly, "what's Taurus?"

"Bull."

"I know, but what's it *mean*, Hank?"

"Oh. Just that. Gentleman cow." He grinned. "I'm one, too. Probably that's the reason you and I never manage to get along with each other. We—"

The explanation was never completed. A blow behind his right ear dropped Hyer into an enveloping bottomless peace.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

**Dr. Thaddeus C. Harker**
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Mr. Rucker shook a chubby fist at Wayne. "You hillbillies . . . You haven't heard the last of this!

# Fox in the Bag

**Any young squirt with a platinum fox and tin-can manners would do well to look up Wayne McCloud in the Dabbit Run social register. The entry: "Poacher first class; free, white, and a bad man to tangle with"**

By JIM KJELGAARD

*Author of "The Red Bull Bellows," "The Lieutenant's Horse," etc.*

OLD man Rucker had had ideas to match his pocketbook when he had built his log house back in the days when the Dabbit Run hills had been covered with mighty pine and hemlock forests. The house was as big as two ordinary houses plus a barn.

The pine and hemlock had long passed on, and old man Rucker with them; but the house still stood on a low ridge overlooking a three-hundred-acre tangle of laurel and brambles that was known as Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

When the house had been built, the three hundred acres was a stand of majestic pines. But lumber barons had not sacrificed practical values to esthetic ones.

The descendants of old man Rucker had gone to the cities to spend the



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money he had wrested from the Dabbit Run hills, but they kept the cabin in good repair. Every year it was opened for a week or so to a party of hunters.

The house, except for the hunting season, had been vacant for years. Consequently, on a torpid day in mid-August, when Rucker's Rabbit Patch bristled with activity, Wayne McCloud, who was passing on the Dabbit Run road, turned aside to see what all the fuss was about.

Four trucks stood in front of the house, and a gang of overalled men swarmed about them removing tarpaulin-covered loads. Two men on the roof of the house were ripping away the mossy shingles, and three following them were putting on a roof of bright new composition sheeting. Inside the cabin hammers pounded and saws whined.

Wayne accosted a blasé young workman who was pecking away with a grubhoe at the stone-littered drive.

"What's everybody so busy about?"

"Young Rucker's fixin' to make hisself a summer home."

"He's sure goin' to a heap of trouble about it," Wayne observed, noting that the roof alone would probably cost more than any house in Dabbit Run.

The workman fixed Wayne with a supercilious eye. "Buddy," he said profoundly, "that guy's got more thousand-dollar bills than any two hound dogs you ever saw've got hair."

Suddenly, as if he had been injected with new and very stimulating currents of energy, the young man fell to digging furiously with the grubhoe.

Wayne sat comfortably beside the road watching him. The Dabbit Run farmers were always working, but it was inspiring to see any outlander fling himself into toil with such grand abandon.

Wayne reached into his pocket and took out his knife. He cut a poplar shoot that grew handy and fell to whittling. He whittled the head of a rattlesnake on the end of it, and was just rounding it off nicely when the man who had inspired the sudden burst of toil in the workman arrived.

Wayne looked up.

THE man was about twenty years old. He had a soft pink cheek and brown hair that was combed high on his head. The whipcord breeches, silk shirt, and polished leather boots he wore had cost him as much as a Dabbit Run farmer earned in a good summer.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Wayne.

It wasn't everybody, or it was hardly anybody, who could talk like that to Wayne without making instant apology or more drastic amends. But everyone had to make allowance for youth and inexperience.

"Right now I'm whittlin' on a snake," Wayne said easily. "Got its head nigh shaped."

"Do you know you're on private property?"

Wayne drew his feet out of the road onto the grassy bank. "No I ain't. The south border of Rucker's Rabbit Patch is this here road. North she runs to that runty little hemlock, the top of which you can see. West she borders the Dabbit Run road, an' east she runs three chains an' ten links beyond the shanty. It's bordered all around by state land, an' this is state land."

The young man's voice had the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed. "I'll give you thirty seconds to leave."

"Sho'," Wayne said. "Never could bring myself to do nothin' in thutty seconds. So, seein' as I ain't goin', suppose you leave."

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The young man's cheek reddened. "What's your name?"

Wayne stood up. He was getting a little mad now, but there was no point in slapping this fresh kid down.

"I'm Wayne McCloud," he said. "Anythin' else you want to know about me, look in the Dabbit Run social register."

"You better be careful," the workman warned. "That's Mr. Rucker."

"When your horn's wanted in this ruckus, it will be tooted," Wayne said.

Goaded by mounting fury, young Mr. Rucker lost his dignity. He shook a chubby fist at Wayne.

"I was told about you hillbillies! You need a lesson, and I'll make an example of you! You haven't heard the last of this!"

But Wayne, shrugging, had already started back down to the Dabbit Run road. There were times to fight and times not to, and a man wouldn't feel exactly right if he slammed that kid one.

Wayne was halfway to his house when young Rucker's car, with a swirling cloud of dust in tow, soared past him.

THE incident at Rucker's was all but forgotten when Wayne reached home. This was August, and Wayne had large plans for the hunting season that opened in October.

He could, for the sum of one hundred and ten dollars, buy as good a coon dog as had ever run the Dabbit Run hills. Coons were high this year, would average four dollars, and any enterprising hunter with a good hound could take at least sixty or seventy. The legal limit was twenty-five, but Wayne never had troubled himself about technicalities.

The only obstacle now was the lack of ninety of the hundred and ten dollars necessary to purchase the dog.

That obstacle wasn't insurmountable. To get the money Wayne had done what for him was an unprecedented thing: gone to work. They were building a road over Loft way, and any able-bodied Dabbit Run male who wanted it could have a job. It paid three dollars a day, and there were thirty-three working days before coon season. Wayne started work tomorrow.

He was up with daylight. He ate a heavy breakfast, packed three sandwiches in a brown paper sack, and started up the road. The trucks were gone from the Rucker house, but there were four cars parked there.

Wayne crossed the hill at the head of Dabbit Run and walked down to where the power graders had ripped a great scar that was to be the road leading into the Loft. Wayne sat down on the seat of a grader to wait for operations to begin.

A half hour later Ike Thomas, the road boss, drove his little sedan to the head of the new road. Wayne called languidly from the grader.

"I'd like a job sittin' in the shade, Ike."

Ike Thomas, a huge man dressed in leather pants and a cotton shirt, both badly in need of washing, got out of the car. He walked to the grader and looked up at Wayne.

"Look here," he said bluntly, "you ain't workin' on this road."

Wayne sat up, startled. "Why?"

"I ain't supposed to say," Ike rumbled. "But that young Rucker was chasin' around yesterday. He found out ever'thing he could about you in Bradby, and as soon as he found out you was goin' to work here, he hiked to the superintendent's office and spiked it.

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His old man's got a wallop, and the kid telephoned him. I wouldn't be tellin' you this if I didn't know you could keep your mouth buttoned."

"I see," Wayne said soberly. "Well, it ain't your fault. Thanks for tellin' me. I did have a little run-in with young Rucker yesterday."

"You pick the darndest people to run in with," Ike said. "You made that soapy-eared young squirt madder'n a wet hornet. Not that he don't need it from what I saw of him. If it wasn't for my five kids and my needin' this job, I'd put you on anyway. You watch that kid, Wayne. He aims to run you out of Dabbit Run."

"Some people run easy an' some don't," Wayne observed. "So long, Ike."

Wayne walked back to Dabbit Run, his face crimson with anger. A baby-faced nitwit twenty years old was going to run him out of Dabbit Run and had already cost him a good road job!

That young squirt needed a hickory switch laid across the seat of those whipcord breeches; and he would get it just as soon as Wayne got back to Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

But, by the time he had walked almost back, Wayne had cooled off some. A switching or a good right to the jaw was a fine thing, but there was much he might do to create a more enduring impression.

Wayne frowned thoughtfully. The armor of the heir to the Rucker fortune couldn't be impregnable. And, when Wayne found the weak spot, he could make up for all insults.

INSTEAD of entering by the road that led to the log house overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch, Wayne slipped into the woods a quarter-mile to one side. Slipping from tree to tree, he stalked down the ridge. As they had been yesterday, a gang of workmen were busy about the lodge.

Five big trucks, piled high with mesh fencing, stood in front of the lodge. Wayne crouched in the brush.

He had been there an hour when a station wagon whirled up the Dabbit Run road, turned into the road leading to the lodge, and spewed another crowd of workmen forth. Then, accompanied by a middle-aged man in black leather leggings and smart brown clothes, Wayne saw young Rucker coming down the ridge.

Wayne lay motionless.

The pair continued on down the ridge and stopped thirty feet away from where Wayne lay hidden.

"You want the whole thing fenced in, Mr. Rucker?" the middle-aged man in the brown uniform asked.

Young Rucker waved a languid hand, the gesture of one who is undeniably monarch of all he surveys or expects to survey.

"All of it. The fence will be ten feet high with two feet underground. It's going to be a private shooting ground. The first of November we're going to initiate the season with a fox hunt. After that I'll import some pheasants, and I suppose some rabbits. Of course, there'll be a gamekeeper stationed at the lodge."

Wayne waited until they had gone on, then sneaked through the brush back to the road. The more ideas some people got, the sillier they came. What was the use of fencing three hundred acres to hunt on when there was three million around all unfenced?

A fox hunt: probably they were going to turn a couple of foxes loose inside the fence after it was built, then go in and shoot them. Wayne shook his head.

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Then a spontaneous grin spread over his face and he felt lighter as he walked on down the road towards his house.

WAYNE was still light-hearted and happy when he got to his house. Even the sight of Lem Knowles sitting on his front door step didn't darken the day.

Lem was the Patten County game warden, and patrolled Dabbit Run. Wayne was the most notorious outlaw in Lem's district, and Lem's burning ambition was to put Wayne in jail. On more than one occasion Lem had come close to fulfilling that ambition.

But right now Lem appeared to be occupied with other things. He grunted a reply to Wayne's cheerful greeting.

"You look like you might be wearin' red flannel underwear, Lem," Wayne observed sympathetically. "Or did your wife beat you up again or somethin'? You're lower'n a lily root."

Lem Knowles sprang to his feet and stood with his back against the porch rail. "Wayne, in the first place, get this. I know that if you ever got a jail sentence for every fish an' game law you ever broke, you'd be in jail for the next hundred an' sixty years. You know it too. Some day, when the luck turns my way, I'm gonna soak you."

"How you talk!" Wayne said virtuously. "You know darn well you'd have to hunt the breadth an' width of Dabbit Run to find an honester man than me."

"In spite of everything I kind of like some things about you," Lem confessed. "I've darn near had you fifty times, an' you allus got away. It's my fault, an' nobody else's, I never got you. I ain't kickin'. An' I'm just hopin', Wayne, that you ain't goin' to think I had anything to do with such low-down tricks as this. I—"

"Such tricks as what?" Wayne demanded.

Lem turned a troubled face to Wayne's. "Both your huntin' an' fishin' licenses are goin' to be revoked for three months."

"My what!"

Lem shook his head. "It ain't my doin's, an' I hope you believe that. They wanted to make it six months. I had to fight like hell to get it down. When I take you in, it'll be for somethin'. I catch you doin', an' it'll be on the level."

Wayne stood stock still, the shock he felt showing in his face. He lived by hunting, fishing, the few dollars he could pick up trapping, and the vegetables he raised in his garden. Taking away his hunting and fishing licenses meant that he would have to risk jail for at least half his meals.

Slowly he reached up with his left hand to unpin the license button on his shirt. He handed it to Lem Knowles, and saw it dropped into Lem's pocket.

"Darn it," Lem said miserably, "I dunno when I've hated to do anything as much as this. But I got orders straight from headquarters an' can't do nothin' else. If the loan of ten dollars will help—"

"Thanks, but never mind, Lem." Wayne's jaw snapped shut. "I know how it is, an' I'll take care of everything."

Wayne watched Lem out of sight. Again he felt a leaping rage, and again he fought to control it. That young squirt with the whipcord pants and baby face—

When it came time for him to pay for all this, he'd pay hard and plenty. A mere sock on the jaw couldn't begin to cover all of it now.

But, if he couldn't hunt and fish legally, it didn't make any difference

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whether he waited for hunting season or not. Wayne grabbed a .25-20 from among his several guns and started up Duck Mountain.

Halfway up five deer jumped from a hemlock thicket, and with white tails waving, went bounding up the mountain. Wayne shot. A fat young buck fell.

Wayne dressed the buck and quartered it. He waited until twilight, then shouldered the four quarters of the deer and started back down to his house.

Twilight was nearly night when he got there, but it wasn't too dark for Wayne to detect a slight motion near his unused hog pen. Wayne stared at it, and after a bit made out a big skunk with a very broad white stripe down its back.

Wayne carried the deer inside his house and cut the flank meat from it. Thoughtfully he carried the flank meat, useless for human consumption, back outside and dumped it beside the hog pen.

Skunks are a lot easier to tame than most people think. Wayne had once known a man with a pet skunk that rode in the big inside pocket of his hunting coat when the man went hunting.

THE fifteenth of October brought with it both a spell of cold weather and the completion of work at the Rucker house.

The drive leading to the big house had been filled with crushed oyster shells. The log building had been completely remodeled, and hovered under its new roof as if guaranteeing shelter and warmth to those who would make merry there.

But the distinguishing characteristic of the changed Rucker place, the one that caused much wonder and more merriment in Dabbit Run, was the fence around Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

Of galvanized two-inch mesh, the fence was sunk into the ground and topped with three strands of barbed wire so that nothing on the inside could get out and nothing on the outside could get in except through the triply padlocked gate.

Why anybody should want to fence in Rucker's Rabbit Patch was beyond Dabbit Run's understanding. After pondering every possible reason, Dabbit Run arrived at a general conclusion: young Rucker had more bats in his belfry than he had brush stalks in his rabbit patch.

During the period between the revocation of his licenses and the middle of October, Wayne had fared pretty well. By using the twenty dollars he had saved toward the coon hound to buy food in those lean times when Lem Knowles was watching him and he couldn't poach his meals, he had even managed to eat regularly.

But the twenty dollars was gone now, and the hunting season was gathering momentum that would shortly bring it into full swing. Wayne wouldn't get his license back for another month. If he only had that coon hound . . .

But he didn't have it and couldn't get it. And he had eaten only a skimpy breakfast and would have even a skimpier dinner because Lem Knowles and two deputies had been working in Dabbit Run for three days now, and might show up at any minute.

Wayne sat on his back porch whittling on another stick. Almost savagely he slashed the stick in half and threw the two parts from him. Inaction was hardly to be borne. First thing he knew, he'd be doing something he shouldn't.

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Then the two-car train that daily struggled up the tracks by Dabbit Run came along, whistled, and stopped at the Dabbit Run station.

Wayne leaped up, ran down to the track, and crossed behind the last car to the station. The baggage compartment on the mail car stood open. Two men were unloading a square box two and a half feet wide by four long.

"What ya got there?" Wayne asked.

Lew Manners, who had worked on the Dabbit Run train since the tracks had been laid, scratched his gray head and spat a quid of tobacco.

"It's some kind of an animal for, le's see"—he read the address again—*"Mr. Edwin Anthony Rucker, Chateau Rucker, Dabbit Run Station.* Must be that new dump up the holler ain't it, Wayne?"

"Yeah," Wayne said. "You gonna leave this thing here?"

Lew Manners scratched his head again and looked at his watch. "I hate to. It's insured for fifteen hundred dollars. But we're fifteen minutes behind time now. Rucker's gamekeeper was supposed to pick it up."

"I'll watch it," Wayne offered.

"Will ye?" Lew Manners brightened and thrust a paper at Wayne. "Tha's the receipt. Have the gamekeeper sign it an' leave it in the mail box. An' thanks a lot."

WAYNE knelt beside the crate and lifted a corner of the cloth that covered it. There was a fox inside, a small animal with a sharp pointed nose and beady little eyes that looked craftily up from the chaff-littered floor of the crate.

It was the size of an ordinary silver fox, but it wasn't a silver. Its sides were creamy, almost white, and it shaded to a rich gray back.

Wayne gasped. No wonder it was insured for fifteen hundred dollars. It was a platinum fox!

The gamekeeper of Chateau Rucker came fifteen minutes later in a rattling pickup truck. He rushed over to the platform and stood with watch in hand. Wayne sat comfortably near the crate. Finally the gamekeeper approached him.

"Pardon me. But what time does the train get here?"

"It's been here," Wayne told him.

The gamekeeper gasped.

"If you're from Rucker's," Wayne said, "this here crate is for you."

The gamekeeper lifted the cloth covering and looked in. A sigh broke from him.

"That's it," he said. "And will I be glad to get rid of it!"

Wayne shoved the receipt at him. "Sign this an' I'll help you load the thing."

The two lifted the crate onto the truck and tied it down.

"If you're going up, I'll give you a lift," the gamekeeper said.

Wayne climbed into the seat beside him. "What's young Rucker aimin' to do?" he asked sociably. "Start a fur farm?"

"Oh no. That's a platinum fox. It's for the opening hunt at Chateau Rucker, scheduled for November first. Mr. Edwin Anthony has invited fifteen gentlemen and fifteen ladies to be his guests. The fox will be cast loose in the shooting grounds. The gentlemen, each carrying a .22 rifle with a single cartridge, will hunt it. The one who brings it down will present it to his lady."

"You mean," Wayne asked, "he's gonna let that fox go in the fence, then they're gonna go shoot it?"

"That's it."

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"Sounds screwy to me," Wayne murmured. "When they gonna let the fox go?"

"Mr. Edwin Anthony will personally attend to loosing the fox some time during the night before the hunt. Even I am not to be permitted access to the shooting grounds until the hunt it over. The fox is very valuable."

Wayne shrugged. "Hope they have a good time. Well, this is where I get off. Thanks for the ride."

AT NINE o'clock in the evening of the thirty-first of October, a bright moon rose over Dabbit Run. It illuminated the Dabbit Run hills in black relief. It made bright pictures of itself in the eight shiny cars huddled in front of the Chateau Rucker. It sported with the countless frost crystals gathered on the new roof of the big lodge.

And it shone over Rucker's Rabbit Patch to light up both that and the man who, inside the fence, was carrying a sack and making a cautious way through the brush.

It didn't shine on Wayne McCloud because he had thoughtfully crawled under a laurel bush overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch a half-hour before the moon rose.

Wayne kept his eyes on the figure inside the fence. There could be no doubt that it was Edwin Anthony Rucker, and there wasn't much doubt that the sack he carried contained the platinum fox.

He made a careful way to the farthest corner of the fence and laid the sack down. He broke off a few laurel branches and covered the sack. Then he started back toward the lodge.

And that fitted exactly Wayne's already well-formed opinion of the character of young Rucker.

His fifteen guests and he were each supposed to have an equal chance at the fox. But young Rucker was taking no chances on anyone but himself getting a fox he had paid fifteen hundred dollars for. Tomorrow he could hunt to the corner, kneel down in the brush, take the fox out of the bag, and shoot it.

Wayne shook his head. If that was the way young Rucker hunted, he'd take his hunting with the meanest and lowest Dabbit Runner.

Then the bright moon, for a part of a second at a time, shone on the flitting shadow that was Wayne McCloud going from bush to bush. A half hour later it revealed him fully as he walked back to the road and, making no attempt at concealment, down it.

The last the moon shone on Wayne that night was when it glanced through the window of his house and lighted Wayne's face, calm in sleep.

There was no reason for Wayne to get up early. The guests of Chateau Rucker would raise cain all night and wouldn't roll out much before nine in the morning. At half past eight Wayne was walking back up the road.

At a quarter to nine Lem Knowles, whizzing up the road in his little coupe, picked him up.

"I'll give you a lift, Wayne."

Lem frowned thoughtfully. Details of the Rucker hunt had been communicated to him along with a special request that he be present to see that no Dabbit Runner messed things up.

He glanced sideways at Wayne. Lem had been holding his breath since he'd revoked Wayne's licenses: it never had been exactly a healthy pastime to tread on Wayne's toes. Not that Lem thought too much of young Rucker; but orders to see that the hunt progressed as it should had come from headquarters.

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Lem set his jaw. Wayne wouldn't interfere. He'd keep him in sight until the hunt was over.

"I suppose you're goin' to the Rucker hunt?" Lem said finally.

Wayne shrugged. "I should worry about their hunt. I got a couple of snares set on the ridge beyond Rucker's Rabbit Patch. Thought I might tie on to a fox or bobcat. Things ain't been too good since you took my licenses."

"I knew they wouldn't be," Lem admitted. "You'll have it back in a couple of weeks. Your snares ain't by no chance set close to Rucker's, are they?"

"There's one on the ridge, maybe seventy feet beyond their fence. I saw the tracks of a big 'ol fox there, an' thought I might take him. But the snare's set on state land. Mighty lucky thing for me foxes are vermin, an' I don't need no license to take 'em. Dunno how I'd live the next two weeks if it wasn't for that."

"That's right," Lem Knowles conceded. "Any fox anybody catches on state land belongs to him. I think I'll just stroll along with you when you look at that snare, though."

"Glad to have you," Wayne agreed cheerfully. "With you along I'll be sure not to get in trouble."

LEM parked his car a quarter-mile beyond the drive leading to Chateau Rucker, that was just coming alive, and the two set out.

Wayne plunged into the brush and, when they were out of sight of the road, waited for Lem to catch up. Side by side they climbed the ridge overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

Wayne kept his eyes on the gray, steel-braced fence below them. Lem looked ahead. Then:

"You got one," Lem announced.

Wayne looked up, surprised. "Did I? Holy gee! Look at that!"

The snare had been set on a spring-pole formed by a bent sapling. Dangling two feet from the ground where it had been jerked when the snare had been tripped and the sapling sprang back into place, was a beautiful platinum fox.

Wayne picked it up. Delightedly he stroked the soft fur.

"Holy jeeminy! A platinum fox! That pelt's wuth upwards of a thousand dollars!"

"I suppose you didn't have the least idea that you was goin' to catch it, either," Lem Knowles said dryly. "I never would have thought there was a platinum fox in all Patten County."

"Nor me neither!" Wayne bubbled. "You know there ain't no funny business about this don't you, Lem? You saw me take it out of my snare, didn't you? An' you know that whoever catches a fox on state land owns it, don't you? That's the law."

"That's the law all right," Lem admitted. "I—"

But the hunt was starting. From the lodge streamed fifteen smartly dressed hunters, each armed with a .22 rifle. Young Rucker, still the soft-cheeked lord of the universe, made a careless and easy way along the side of the fence. The rest spread out to various places, beating through the brush.

Lem and Wayne saw young Rucker approach the corner, watched him duck and go out of sight in the brush.

Then the crisp autumn air was drenched with an eye-smarting, throat-filling stench. Young Rucker leaped up, yelled, and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. Dropping his gun, at a dead run he started back along the fence.

But the stench followed him, seemed

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to spring from him. In the corner of the fence appeared a big skunk with a very broad white stripe down its back. The skunk had given all he had to young Rucker and hadn't missed once.

"Let's get out of here," Lem Knowles said.

Lem shook his head. By all the rules Dabbit Run lived by, Wayne, having suffered serious handicaps, should have had to work like the dickens to get through the winter at all. But the deeper hole Wayne got into, the higher he leaped when he came out.

How the deuce that fox had gotten into Wayne's snare! Nobody but Wayne would ever know.

Sitting beside Lem in the car, Wayne held the platinum fox across his lap. It had been easy, for a man who had thrown as many trotlines as Wayne had, to toss a hook and line over the fence, hook the bag the fox was in, draw it to him, and put the fox in the snare.

It had been even easier to lower the skunk into the place where the fox had been. For the past six weeks the skunk had been sleeping in a bag on Wayne's porch and hadn't made any fuss about it. But Wayne knew how to handle skunks.

"I wonder," Lem Knowles said after a bit, "I wonder just how that skunk got there?"

Wayne stretched luxuriously. There flashed before his mind a picture of the coon dog he should have had, the road job he had lost, and the lean two months when eating or going hungry had been a toss-up

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," he said dreamily.


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I had the barn blazing nicely; now for the rescue of Conan

# The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

FINNIAN the Irish bard, a man equally dextrous with harp and blade, has become accustomed to the chaos that has spread through all Europe since the fall of Charlemagne's empire. He attends strictly to his own affairs—until the night he meets an eerie little man who claims to be an ancient Pictish priest. This gnome places a strange judgment on Finnian. "While you are in my land," he says, "you will aid any man or woman in need."

Shortly Finnian is embroiled in the turbulent affairs of that region of France. He makes an enemy of Chilbert, a powerful robber baron; he establishes a tentative friendship with Father Walter, warlike abbot of a large monastery. The third important leader in the Loire district is Conan the Breton, and it is he whom Finnian rescues from Chilbert's men.

Having sworn blood-brotherhood, the Irish bard and the Breton chief wage a valiant battle against their attackers. Eventually some of Conan's followers come to their aid, but Finnian has been badly wounded. When he finds consciousness again, he is in care of a woodsman.

**This story began in the Argosy for June 22**



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AT LENGTH Finnian leaves the woodsman's hut and sets out on his aimless travels without having seen his friend Conan. He is spending a pleasant visit at a monastery when the ships of the marauding Danes come up the river. Here is a chance to travel a bit, and so Finnian sets himself to please the Vikings with his rollicking ballads; they agree to make him their *skald*.

But that potent spell put on Finnian by the old Pict cuts short his cruise with the Danes. They've taken a lovely Frankish girl prisoner, and Finnian finds it necessary to save her from slavery. He has got her safely ashore when a robber band descends on the two of them; Finnian has just time enough to send the girl into hiding before the robbers seize him.

ONCE again his music and his wit stand him in good stead, and he is not slaughtered by his captors. But the animal-like existence of these filthy, shiftless fellows disgusts Finnian, and so when they drink themselves into a stupor one night, he makes his escape.

At last it seems as if Finnian is free to go his own way. Bellowing a happy song, he is bathing himself in a stream when a group of horsemen led by a woman appear suddenly on the bank. There's nothing for Finnian to do but to grasp his sword, set his back against a tree and wait while the men discuss the possibility of hanging him. . . .

## CHAPTER XVIII

### CALL OFF YOUR DOGS

I HAD no answer for him in my despair. If they hanged me, naturally I was going to see to it that they hanged a corpse. But as I was considering rushing them to get it over with, the woman amazed me by interceding.

"Wait a minute, Jean," she said, and I saw to my incredulous relief, that she was in charge. I'd been giving all my attention to the men previously, but now I wanted to know something about her. She was as blond as myself, a neatly but strongly built, sweet-faced woman who knew her own mind.

"Why don't you put on your clothes?" she suggested.

"Are your dogs called off?"

"My men," she corrected me. "For that long anyhow."

My ragged garments weren't quite dry, but I was glad to get into them. Clothes, even though they're of no real use in a fight, make a man feel more protected.

She gazed at me searchingly when I had finished and was facing her again. "You were singing a song," she reminded me.

Her unexpected remark gave me hope that we could conduct negotiations on the friendly basis I earnestly desired. "That's right. Did you like it?" I asked, brightening.

"No," she said.

"Oh well," I shrugged, "it's not a woman's song." It seemed to me that the conversation had reached a dead end, but she opened the way.

"My husband's very fond of it."

"Your husband seems to have good taste in all things." Nevertheless, I was wildly searching for an explanation. That song, appropriately to its subject, had been written in Gaelic.

My puzzlement, I could now see, was giving her a great deal of amusement. "My husband can fortunately only recall snatches of it," she teased me further, "but he sings it all the time. He says it was made by his best friend."

Dumb with bewilderment, I was half-convinced that I was in reality dreaming. The other men couldn't make any sense out of her words either and stirred restlessly. Not very hopeful that there was a rational explanation for the woman's improbable statements, I began trying to remember on what occasions and with whom in France I could possibly have sung that song.

Promptly and stunningly it was clear that there could be but one solution to the problem. The song was the one I had been mumbling over and over during that last hour, or however long it was, of the stand at the vault.

She saw I had the key and smiled. "You're the man he was talking of," she told me rather than asked.

"Why must I be?" I countered. "Once the song is made anybody can sing it."

"Yes," she conceded gaily, "but I don't

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believe, as far as that particular song is concerned, that anybody but the maker and my husband, who happens to like him, would bother."

I laughed, as I could well afford to do, seeing that enemies had turned out to be allies. She laughed back, and from that moment we were friends. Her companions were still mystified, naturally, and the man called Jean spoke for them. "What's so funny about a song nobody can understand?"

"Oh, but I can understand it," she contradicted him. "Conan studied in Ireland, and he told me what it means. Jean, this man you were going to hang if he'd be nice about it is Finnian who was with Conan in the fight at the Old Farms."

I HAD been correct in my original estimate. Jean's face could be very jolly indeed. He was off his horse in an instant, offering apologies and pledges of friendship, and all the others followed his example. Conan, it was understandably clear, was well liked by his men.

Being a little shaky from reaction, I didn't have much to say in return, but I grinned amiably. After my experiences of the past few days it was good to be with people I could respect again.

"It's my turn now," Ann told them after a minute or so, and they drew aside to let her stand before me. Conan, as I would have expected, had used sound sense in choosing his woman. She was clear and honest and laughed when she could.

Her face was very serious then, though, and she had great dignity as she looked at me. Beneath her scrutiny, perforce, I looked at myself and wondered what, if anything, there was for her to see. A man can feel very humble when a woman is considering him, and one corner of my mouth twitched down in self-derision.

She saw that and quite simply took my face between her hands and kissed me. "You'll come with us, won't you?" she asked, letting her palms fall to my shoulders. "Conan will never forgive me if I don't bring you along. He's away now, but we expect him back within the week."

If, as it seemed, I was condemned to be mixed up in the troubles of that country whenever I happened to be in it, it was well to be among friends. And it would be grand to see Conan again. "Thanks," I said. "Who'll ride me?"

"Take my horse, and I'll double up with somebody else," Jean offered. "I owe you that for running you that day." He chuckled. "Nobody told me that you took Conan up on Chilbert's horse."

"Didn't you know that?" Ann asked. "Why, that was the top of the joke."

"I was away when Conan got well enough to tell just what had happened, and I only got the story second hand." He scrambled up behind a comrade. "Let's get started. I want to have a drink with this man."

I rode next to Ann at the head of the cavalcade. "How did you happen to be passing by?" I queried.

Her face became sad. "Word of a Dane raid on the Loire came to us," she said somberly. "I have kinsmen there. That is, I had. The house had been burned when we arrived."

"Maybe your kinfolk escaped." I suggested, but she shook her head.

"They would have come to us, I'm sure."

My unfortunate, if inevitable, question had left her in a despondent mood I didn't try to break. She would have to have it out with herself, and the sooner the better.

I on my part had enough to occupy my mind. My hosts had imminent war on their hands, and there was no telling when it would break upon them. To what extent a friend's war is one's own is a question of some delicacy. Rationally I could justify non-participation, but there are so many times when obeying the dictates of common sense makes a man feel like a louse.

In a couple of hours we came to the ford, and I saw that the barge I had stolen hadn't been duplicated. It was the tag end of summer, however; the water was low; and we crossed easily to the bank where I'd first seen the girl I'd extracted from the Danes. I hoped she had emerged from

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her subsequent difficulties as fortunately as I.

It must be confessed, however, that I had serious doubts.

## CHAPTER XIX

### SHALL WE DRINK ANOTHER GLASS

ABOUT fifteen miles beyond the ford we came to Conan's stronghold. It was only partially completed, but it was of solid stone. Except for church work or where Rome or Charlemagne had passed I had never seen a stone edifice before, and I halted to admire it. This was what had inspired Piers with the longings he'd never try to satisfy.

"Conan got the idea for it somewhere," Jean said with satisfaction. "It'll be thirty-five feet high when we're through, with plenty of room for men to maneuver on top. What's more, it's ditched, with water around it deep enough to drown a man. That fort will need some taking."

I agreed and rode on, noting that although there were wide fields under cultivation, all the houses in sight were clustered in the shelter of the fort. There could be no surprise attack which could prevent the villeins from taking refuge, intact with families and food. These lands could be defended with a minimum of loss.

We crossed the ditch, and a wide one it was, over a wooden bridge which had been let down for us by a man on watch. The hall, not to mention the other buildings within, was an old Frankish wooden structure, but Ann told me that that, too, was to have a stone substitute.

"I'll arrange for dinner to be served as soon as possible," she told me when our horses had been led away. "Jean will show you where you sleep when you've attended to the wine he was talking about."

She smiled and turned away, but as she did so a girl came out of the hall and rushed to meet her. I knew that girl, and as the women embraced it came to me that she was one of the kinfolk whom Ann had mourned for dead. About the others, I was aware, Ann had been sadly right.

Jean and the other men, naturally interested, forgot about me, so I stood to one side watching. They all asked a lot of questions and had many bitter things to say about the Danes. But the fact that even the girl herself was alive was better news than they had expected, so on the whole they didn't feel so bad.

Then one of the men happened to shift his position, and she saw me. Her mouth closed on a word, and she stared with no sign of welcome. The others turned to see what she was looking at, while I smiled uneasily.

"Oh, do you know Finnian?" Ann asked.

That was exactly the wrong thing to say. "He wouldn't tell *me* his name," the girl replied austerely, "though I asked him civilly."

"I was busy," I muttered lamely, wondering how it was that even the most brainless women had a genius for making a man feel like a fool. Not that this one was by any means brainless.

"Where did you meet him?" Ann pursued, and I mentally crossed myself.

"Down by the ford. He threatened to kill me with a fish spear."

"Oh, no!" Ann's voice was horrified.

"Oh, yes! And the next time I saw him," the indictment went on remorselessly, "he was with the Danes. Friends with them," she emphasized.

THE men were scowling doubtfully, and I saw with regret that the bridge had been pulled up behind us. There were no readily understandable explanations, and I didn't attempt to present them with feeble excuses.

"Well, what's going to happen?" I enquired shortly. "Are you going to let me go in peace or not?"

But having made a dent in my peace of mind, she was satisfied. She had paid me back for the cavalier way in which circumstances had forced me to treat her. "Of course," she said in a small, reflective voice, "he did save me from the Danes when they were getting ready to sell me for a slave."

"Marie!" Ann's tone contained a mixture

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of relief, amazement, and indignation. Jean threw his head back and shouted his mirth. I bitterly wondered what I had done to deserve meeting such a girl. Marie smiled, pleased with herself.

"I'm sorry, Finnian," Ann apologized contritely for their doubt of me. "Why didn't you say that in the first place, Marie?" She shook the girl, still partly angry with her. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know exactly what did happen," her cousin answered truthfully. "They were taking me away in one of their ships, then all of a sudden they landed, he threw me over the side, and carried me away."

"How did you manage to shake a Dane loose from anything valuable?" a man asked respectfully.

"Poetry," I replied. "He liked mine." I could see they thought I had actually used some sort of spell, but they didn't say anything.

I was tired and anxious to get the wine Ann had mentioned, but that girl was always in my way. It was embarrassingly evident that something was expected of her, and uncomfortable silence fell upon us. She flushed, thinking a moment, then went at it bravely.

Coming quickly to me, she smiled, though half-fearing I might rebuff her. "I don't know you or where you're going. Maybe after today or tomorrow I'll never see you again. But at the worst time for me you were the most friend I could have, and that was good of you. Very good."

It was well done, and, remembering how bitterly I had resented having to put myself in danger for her, I knew it was better than I deserved. Nevertheless, I could not in graciousness say my service was nothing. I winked at her. "I couldn't bear the idea of so much Christian beauty being wasted on buzzard-faced Moorish infidels."

"Naturally." She grinned, and the tension vanished.

My own face sobered. "And," I went on, "I couldn't help but be moved with pity at the thought of those poor Danes trapped at sea with that baneful tongue of yours."

Jean, who evidently never missed an opportunity to enjoy laughter, roared again to drown out her own appreciative chuckle.

"Who were the men who captured you?" she asked when she could be heard.

"A crew of outlaws led by a fellow called Piers," I answered, looking at the others to see what reaction the name would educe.

Ann frowned, and Jean whistled. "That's a bad bunch, and Piers is a mad dog. You're lucky he didn't kill you just to see the flies gather."

"We saw their camp as we came north this morning," Ann said, "but as they weren't on our land we let them alone. How did you escape?"

"There was no trick to that. They finally got hold of enough wine to get them all drunk at once." I turned to Marie. "Did you have any trouble after we parted company?"

"Not a bit. I was afraid to travel on the road except by dark, though, and as I found nothing but berries to eat I wasn't strong enough to walk very fast. It took me a couple of nights to reach the ford even." She turned to her cousin. "I hid out in the woods during the daytime. That's how I happened to miss you, Ann."

THAT last sentence recalled to her the tragedy that had driven her there. Ann put an arm around her, and the two women walked off together to resolve the matter of death in the family, no doubt, at the poor best possible.

Our eyes followed them commiseratingly. "Let's have that wine," Jean said after a moment.

"Fine," I agreed, and we made for a table in the shade of the hall.

At Jean's shouted order a flagon and two cups were brought. It was good wine. The first gulp spread a healthy interior glow, and I relaxed contentedly. "How soon do you expect Conan?" I asked.

"Tomorrow or a week from tomorrow." He shrugged. "It all depends on how long it takes the man he's seeing to make up his mind. He's kin to Conan, and we think we can get him as ally, but he's a canny

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bird, who won't be hurried. I take it that you know pretty much all about our political divisions?"

"My education may not be complete, but it's thorough enough," I said ruefully. "I know a lot more than a stranger has a right to."

He nodded cheerfully. "You have had a pretty rough time of it, haven't you? Well then, Gregory, the man in question, holds land directly north of the abbey's, which also borders on the northern reach of Chilbert's territory. Chilbert has the abbey on two sides as it is, and if he won over Gregory, as we assume he'll try to do, he'd have it on three. The abbot wants to remain neutral, but under pressure of a squeeze like that he might feel forced to join the count.

"Well, you see from that." Jean sloshed the wine in his half-emptied cup thoughtfully. "The fellow's damned important to everybody, and he's smart enough to know it. Conan's been sounding him out for months but has received nothing but evasions.

"Finally, since we need Gregory so much, and as long as nobody will risk large-scale hostilities until the harvest is fully taken care of, Conan decided to go himself. He left just before we got word of the Dane raid two days ago, and knowing what a horsetrader his man is, he said not to expect him for four or five days or more. Still he might come tonight."

"Did Conan go alone?"

"He took four others." Jean scowled. "I wanted him to take a good-sized troop, but he maintained that when you're asking a man for help you shouldn't burden his hospitality with an army. Then, too, he didn't want to take men from the harvest or from work on the walls."

"I see." It was remarkably pleasant sitting there. Bees buzzed soothingly up and down a flowering vine and drank in unison with us. The fine day grew finer as it cooled with the waning afternoon. The wine was even better than I had first thought. I was sure that nothing ill could befall Conan.

"Rainault! Fulke!" Jean called out suddenly. "Come here!"

I ROUSED from dreamy contemplation of beatitude to see a chunky, wedge-faced man of about forty approaching in company with a tall, freckled youth.

"Rainault," Jean said to the older of the two, "say when you saw this man before." He leaned back, happy over the puzzle he had presented, while I met the newcomer's dark-eyed scrutiny blankly.

"I've got it!" He slapped his companion in vigorous delight. "It's the one, Fulke! Don't you recognize him?" He turned to me once more and laughed. "Lord, how you cursed us!"

He didn't seem to mind, so I smiled vaguely, not quite at my keenest. "Interesting but not true," I told him. "You're thinking of somebody else; I'm—"

"Finnian," he silenced me. "I didn't expect you to place me, but I found you at the Old Farms and took you to Thomas' house. You weren't for being nice about it." He grinned reminiscently. "It was good cursing."

I concentrated. "I remember a little of it now. At the time I couldn't get it through my head that everybody I saw wasn't a man of Chilbert's."

"You made that plain." He jerked his head toward the lad, who had been staring at me fixedly. "Fulke here is the one who first got wind of you and Conan that day."

"It was when you were singing the tirade," the latter burst out excitedly. "I couldn't get near enough to see without risking discovery, but when the song indicated there were two of you I felt sure that the other must be Conan."

I looked at them with interest. One was the young minstrel who was said to have memorized my song on the spot and sung it all about to deride Chilbert's power. The first man was he who had led the rescue expedition. I rose.

"I am in debt to you both," I announced with a formality that was perhaps a trifle heavy. "If you'll call for cups I hold it fitting to toast the reunion."

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That was done, and for the next hour the four of us drank and talked with great amiability. No one was drunk; but on a warm day it doesn't take too much wine to soothe a man, and all of us were soothed.

We broke off wrangling good-naturedly about something or other to grin at Ann, who was smiling at us with the special tolerance a woman reserves for the harmless follies of men she likes.

"Dinner's ready if you want to eat," she informed us.

Jean rolled an owlish eye at me. "Do you think it would be wise to abandon such good wine?"

"The full weight of my opinion is against it," I replied. "We might never get any like it again. Consider that possibility before you make any rash decision," I concluded warningly.

"There will be excellent wine with the meal," she humored us, "so you'll be quite safe."

"Lots of wine?" Rainault asked with a shrewdness I admired.

"Yes, lots."

We four looked at each other. "It seems all right," I said cautiously. "Shall we take a chance?"

Jean rose boldly. "Let's risk it."

## CHAPTER XX

### DAY BEFORE DISASTER

THE next few days were enjoyable ones during which I was left to my own devices until late afternoon and enjoyed good company during the evenings.

Daytimes the men were busy with the harvest and the building of the fort, while Ann had her double job of chatelaine and housekeeper. Marie assisted her in every way possible, proving she was wise enough to see that work was the best cure for her griefs. Outwardly she gave little evidence of what she was enduring, and I took a mildly proprietary pride in her.

As for myself I took advantage of the free time on my hands to pay my debt to Thorgrim. Locally nobody but Conan, who had done Viking work, would understand the poem, but if and when I got to Otho's court, men could listen. It wasn't bad as poems-to-order go. It lacked the heat of inspired conviction, of course, but there was nothing I could do about that. Thorgrim got the best craftsman's job I could produce for him and would have to rest content with it.

When not so engaged I rode around the countryside to see what Conan was accomplishing. He was doing a magnificent job. Even quite far afield no villein scuttled away like a badger making for his hole at sight of me, and many had found sufficient confidence and human poise to return a cheerful greeting.

I saw no burnt houses, no hungry children, no casually left corpses in all that locality. Everywhere men were engaged in reaping full, unspoiled crops to tide over the winter. It was a rare and marvelously wholesome sight such as I had seldom seen, especially in France.

On a couple of occasions Fulke managed to get away from the work in hand to go with me. He was a pleasant, clever lad without swank, but I found his conviction that I was a great poet—arrived at solely because he wanted to believe it—somewhat embarrassing.

He longed, I found, to be himself a maker, and by precept, if not, perhaps by example, I could be of help to him. It was pleasant to talk craft to so eager a listener, and by this indulgence of both him and myself I won a good friend.

Day by day, however, the tension began to grow, although nobody said anything much. There was no definite cause for alarm in the fact that nothing had been heard from Conan, for he had left prepared for somewhat lengthy negotiations. But everybody was experiencing concern, none the less, as each night fell without news. Ann ceased to smile as much as usual, and a general air of sober, if unvoiced, speculation pervaded the place.

Dinner on the fifth day was an unwontedly subdued affair. Since there was a precocious nip of autumn in the air, as soon as the sun went down we took our wine

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indoors. Jean and I attempted facetious chatter to keep the spirits of the gathering high, but we weren't doing very well at it, and nobody joined in our own unconvinced laughter. At the same time nobody felt like sleep, either, so we sat up later than customary, growing progressively more silent and drinking without pleasure.

Ann was the first to hear anything. "The watchman's challenging," she said, starting to her feet. Then I heard the horse's hoofs.

WE WERE crowding hurriedly to the door when it was opened by what was left of a man. Aside from being exhausted, he was badly wounded. In three separate places his clothes were stiffened by large patches of dried blood.

"It's François!" Rainault said in a taut, hard voice. "Wine for him! Quick!"

It was a minute before this man who had gone forth with Conan and returned in such bad case could get strength to be articulate. While we waited the rest of us fidgeted, painfully anxious for him to speak. None of us would meet the others' eyes.

"What is it, François?" Jean was almost whispering. "Conan! Where's Conan?"

The fellow made a great effort and raised his head a little from Fulke's supporting arm. "Hostage," he managed hoarsely.

The worst had not yet happened then. We let him rest a little longer while Fulke gave him wine in small sips. "Tell us!" Jean finally commanded. "We've got to know."

"Gregory's holding him," François mumbled hoarsely. "He's sending to find what Chilbert will offer."

Ann gasped, and Rainault began cursing with smothered violence. I didn't know how I felt, but it wasn't good. My teeth clenched till my jaws ached. Jean meanwhile went on patiently and inexorably worming the story out of the exhausted man, and finally we had it all.

Even though not certain of his kinsman as an ally Conan had trusted him for hospitality. Not unreservedly, however, as he had taken the precaution of leaving François in hiding several miles down the road from Gregory's fortress with orders to return home and report if he received no message by a certain time.

"Sunrise today was the time he said for me to beat it back, but I couldn't leave without knowing something for sure, see?"

We saw.

"I started for Gregory's place, and part way there I met a fellow riding like he was going somewheres. I figured he could only be coming from the fort and would know about Conan, so I waylaid him. He cut me up some, but I finally got him so's he'd talk."

"You killed him, of course," Rainault said.

"Yeah, but it wasn't any use. His horse headed back home while we were fighting."

That would naturally have given the play away. Ann had the man carried to bed and promised that she herself would shortly give attention to his wounds. The rest of us stood where we were, thinking hard.

"They found the messenger's horse in a couple of hours, say," Rainault offered as an opener. "Another man was on his way before noon."

"But Chilbert may take a little looking for," Jean said.

"Yes, and Chilbert won't send. He'll gather riders and come himself for game as big as Conan."

"No moon tonight," Jean groaned. "We'd never locate the trails without light."

"And there are no through roads. We'll have to wait till morning to ride."

There was an oath that Conan and I had sworn. I stared at the floor, growing wearily disgusted as my grasp of the situation enlarged. Although I wasn't yet sure what could be done I did know that I couldn't leave it for Jean and Rainault to bungle. Why, they didn't even see what they were faced with!

I moistened my lips and spoke with toneless authority. "Forget about your riders. An expedition won't do any good." For the first time I raised my eyes, and I saw to my surprise that Ann had been looking at me, waiting for me to speak.

"What do you mean it won't do any

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good?" Jean asked roughly. "Do you think we can save him by prayer?"

I paid no attention to his understandable rudeness. "You get there with a troop," I said. "Gregory says stay put or he'll kill Conan. You wait around to swear at him. Chilbert arrives with *his* army. He and Gregory have you sandwiched. You probably lose your troop, and they've certainly still got Conan. No, it's one man's job."

"Mine, then!" Jean and Rainault chorused.

"No, mine," I snapped.

"Damn you, no!" Rainault shouted. "Who the hell do you think you are telling us—"

"He's Conan's sworn brother," Ann told him quietly.

They were abashed then and listened. Next to Ann herself I had the most right to speak.

## CHAPTER XXI

### MY HARP IS MY SWORD

SOMEWHERE in the back of my mind I could see that infernal Pict grinning triumphantly. In recent months I had stepped into sufficient trouble but always at times when circumstances had me cornered, leaving no loophole. Now I was outbidding eager scapegoats.

"One reason I'm better suited for this job," I explained to Conan's lieutenants, "is that I'm a stranger to Gregory and all his men, not to mention the fact that I'm obviously not a native. You're both known by reputation and, I suspect, personally."

They nodded glumly. "Moreover," I gestured toward where my harp hung on the wall, "that will give me entry and a reason for passing that way on the loose which demands no explanation."

"All right," Jean gave in. "What are you going to do once you're inside?"

"I don't know," I answered frankly. "Anything that seems indicated. I'm not guaranteeing I'll be of any use even, because they've got us on the hip and no mistake. But it's our only chance."

"Yes," Ann said after a long moment, and that settled it.

"You'll need a guide," Rainault said hopefully.

"I will," I agreed, "but it can't be either of you. You'll both be needed to save what's possible if Conan doesn't return."

I didn't want a companion that would pound me with advice and suggestions. But there was one among them, who, I felt sure, would follow and obey me blindly when, as, and if I conceived a plan. The youngster, Fulke, had a bad case of hero worship which he'd get over in time, being a sound lad. Now, however, I could make use of it.

"If you know the way, I'd like you to go with me, Fulke."

His face lighted up as if I'd just given him something of immense value instead of inviting him on an expedition to get his throat cut. "Sure, I know the way. Thanks, Finnian!"

I grunted sourly. Everybody except myself seemed to think that extricating a man from a well garrisoned fort was some sort of delightful pastime. Had I chosen to stay with them, the other men would have gone on discussing the project, but I wasn't in the mood for useless gab.

"I'm going outside for a while," I announced. "Try to get some sleep, Fulke."

He had the saccharine docility of a child with a treat in store. "I'll go to bed right away," he promised.

Ann's face was stiff and white. "I'll have food ready when the night starts to change." With an poignant gesture she touched my arm then turned away. I nodded to the others and strode to the door.

It was a star-filled night, cool and quiet. Ordinarily I might have found it too chilly without a cloak, but trifling discomforts could make no impression on me then. I walked slowly over to a low, unfinished portion of the outer wall and after first notifying the watchman of my presence sat down to consider. I had vaguely hoped that inspiration for a course of procedure might come to me, but the more I thought about it the more convinced I became that I would have to wait and improvise plans after I'd looked the scene of action over.

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I had no inclination for sleep, but I was on the verge of forcing myself to attempt it when I heard a low but urgent voice just below me. "Would you help me up, please?"

The voice was Marie's, and I assumed its rightful owner was using it, although the figure in the heavy shadow of the wall was unrecognizable. I reached down a hand, hauled her up, and waited to hear what she had to say. I didn't object to her company, but I was considerably surprised that she had sought mine.

"I'LL go away if you wish," she said with a hesitancy I had not learned to expect from her. "I know you've got important things on your mind."

"Both obliging and flattering," I murmured. "You haven't always so pampered me."

"No," she admitted, and I could sense that she was more at ease. Nevertheless, her tone remained serious. "You may not come back, and I wouldn't like to feel that I had never talked to you. You happen to have been very important to me once, and I'd like to understand you a little. Do you see that?"

I nodded and then remembered the darkness. "It was nice of you to come out," I helped her. "I'm too restless for sleep."

"Thanks, whether it's true or not." She hugged herself, fighting off the chill. "Everybody takes it for granted that you're willing to go for Conan. They're so wrapped up in what they're trying to do that they think you're part of it. But you're not, are you?"

"No."

"And suppose you save Conan—what'll you do then?"

"Hadn't figured."

"Oh yes, you have," she astonished me by saying.

"If you can help it you won't come back to get mixed up in troubles here any longer."

I didn't bother to argue the point. "I'm only catechizing you to find out some things for myself," she apologized when I didn't answer. "You see, I don't belong to this, either. I don't belong to anything now, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm talking to you because you seem to get along without everything most people want. Or have you got them somewhere else?"

"I haven't got much," I admitted.

"Well, I had a home and people. Things belonged to me. I was going to marry a man."

"What stopped you?"

"The Danes. They killed him, too."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Did you want him much?"

"Some. I don't know. But as a wife I'd be a person doing everything about life that I could. I wanted that, and now I'm not sure that I can ever have the chance again."

I knew a girl without property couldn't often make the sort of match she desired. "You've still got the land," I suggested.

"Yes, but there are no men to rebuild the hall and hold it now, and none can be spared for long hereabouts. If Conan lives why— Well, I've seen what he has done, starting out with almost nothing but himself. He knows what we all must have and has the strength to bring it about.

"He has all our hope in his hand; and that's what is so queer now. If one of the others were going for him he would be desperate with the knowledge that his whole world would collapse if he failed. But you don't care."

SHE couldn't be expected to know how I felt about Conan. "Oh, I do in my way."

"What is your way? That's what I'm trying to find out in case all the props I know about should fail me utterly, as they seem likely to do."

"Don't look to me for any guiding philosophy," I told her uneasily. "I have none. There's a thing I possess which pleases me. It's poetry, and by and large it is a spacious enough kingdom in which to move. In situations where it isn't adequate there aren't any rules."

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"You're deliberately taking a trip to do something which is apt to prove disastrous for you. If it doesn't, you and Conan will get drunk and talk a lot of nonsense together, then you'll go off as unconcernedly as a dog that's stopped to scratch a flea. What you're trying to do is hard and good, and it should have great significance for you. But it hasn't."

"Maybe I'll have time for it later," I said, amused alike at her diagnosis and arraignment, "if a bunch of Franks don't stick swords through me. So far as I know now there's only one significance to that."

She laughed apologetically. "I'm sorry. Maybe you have your reasons. In times like ours it must be as hard to be a man as to be a woman."

I looked at Marie's shadowy profile and wondered if I would live to talk to a girl again after that night. Feeling half fey, as I did, I had no passion, but I experienced the tenderness a man occasionally knows for women in general seen as the embodiment of fineness and beauty.

And with that feeling came a sort of weary resignation. "I'm glad you came out here," I told her again. "I'll sleep now, and I can use the rest." I jumped down and reached up. "Here, take my hand."

I eased her descent, and we walked toward the hall quietly, our fingers still locked. A couple of torches were still burning to light the main room, but no one was about. I filled two wine cups and looked at her face, a lovely and always changing pattern in the flickering light. "Good luck!" I toasted her.

She looked at me with compassion. "Good luck, Finnian." It was the first time I had heard her use my name, a thing I have always found compelling on the lips of a sightly woman. We smiled warmly and parted.

I GOT into bed, and the next thing I knew Jean was shaking me vigorously. "It's still night!" I protested.

"First light's showing," he insisted and threw the blanket on the floor. Dumb with drowsiness I reached for my clothes, but he handed me a cloak. "Take a dive in the moat," he ordered. "You can't be sleepwalking now."

The cool water first, then the cooler air on my wet body waked me thoroughly. I dressed on the bridge, for Jean had followed with my clothes, then returned with him swiftly to the hall.

Fulke was before me and greeted me enthusiastically, but Rainault told him to shut up and eat. The meal was adequate but briefly handled. Nobody shared it with us; they all stood watching, their anxious expressions and subdued whispers adding to the cheerlessness of the dimly lit hall.

"Come on," I mumbled to Fulke over my final bite, and led the way out to the court. The sky had perceptibly lightened by then, and I could see the three horses being held for us by the gate. The third—destined, we hoped, for Conan—was loaded with my harp, such trifling supplies as we would need, and a sword. That, too, was for Conan.

"Now you do exactly what Finnian tells you and nothing else," I heard Rainault warning Fulke while Jean was giving me a leg up.

Marie was not there, having said her farewell the night before, but every other member of the household and garrison was astir; and there was a half-hearted attempt to give us a cheer.

Ann, who had been taking leave of Fulke, now turned to me. I was glad the pre-dawn murk made our faces unreadable.

"Finnian," she said, and that was the most she could manage. I reached down my hand, she held it to her cheek an instant, then pushed away through the crowd.

"Don't drink all the wine," I told Jean. "Watch him, Rainault."

They made valedictory gestures, and we trotted across the bridge. The fields were smoky with mist, but the pallid sky was cloudless. We were going to have a good day for it, which, as there had been no recent rains to muddy the trails, guaranteed us prime traveling conditions. It proved good for our morale, too.

In the early chill we rode in moody

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silence, for even Fulke had been depressed by the lugubrious attitude of our well-wishers; but when the world became fair with light we drew a measure of gaiety from it. Fulke, especially, having recovered his zest for the undertaking, joked and sang continually.

When the sun had been up two or three hours I saw that we rode a little south of east. We were heading, my calculations assured me, into territory I had visited before. "Pull up," I ordered Fulke, and while he fidgeted with curiosity I considered what had just occurred to me.

"Aren't we heading toward the abbey?" I asked after a minute.

"More or less, but not quite. We'll cross the road several miles north of it."

"How soon could we reach it?"

"In about an hour, traveling fast. But what would be the use of going there?"

I thought a little longer. It was a chance, but it was a good chance. It was, in fact, the only useful notion that had so far occurred to me. "If we can see the abbot he may help us," I said. "He's the only man I know of who can."

## CHAPTER XXII

### BROTHER, COME TO WAR

SO IT came to pass, just as it had a little over two months before, that I sat in the saddle looking up to where Father Clovis lounged above the abbey gates. "Ha!" he chuckled, "here's our poet and scholar back with a new steed."

"The other was taken from me," I said, sighing, as I thought of that splendid bay.

"He begrudges a man his own horse," the monk said to no one in particular. He chuckled again. "I saw Chilbert on it not three weeks back. I could have kicked myself for not having recognized it when you first came. How have you been?"

"Fine, thanks." I jerked my head at my companion. "Father Clovis, this minstrel is Fulke, a man of Conan's."

I uttered the concluding phrase pointedly, and the monk straightened, cocking an eye. "I've heard of him. So it was you who helped raise Cain with Oliver. I often wondered."

"We'd like to talk to the abbot," I said when he paused questioningly. "It's important."

"All right." He nodded. "I'll see if he has any time to spare for horse thieves."

We rode into the court, and a couple of minutes later the abbot himself came striding toward us. He looked at me keenly as we exchanged greetings. "Well, my son?"

"Chilbert's about to score a coup, and we're trying to stop him. Would you be interested to hear?"

"Yes. Will you come to my study?"

Fulke and I dismounted. "Thank you, father. I'd like Father Clovis to be there, too."

Knowing something of my man, I came to the point directly the door was closed. "You once suggested that I join Conan. I have done so, and now in turn I've come to ask help for him from you."

"That sounds just," he admitted. "What's Conan's need?"

"Gregory's got him."

"His kinsman?"

"Yes, and his betrayer. He's holding him to see what Chilbert will bid. One of our men intercepted a messenger."

Clovis whistled, and he and the abbot exchanged glances. The latter shook his head, and I allowed him to ponder in silence. I knew that he would quickly see what could and could not be essayed.

After a while he raised his eyes to look at me. "What do you yourself plan to do?"

"I don't know any too well, but as an unknown harper I'll probably be given entry."

"Not much but something," he remarked. "What do you want of me?"

"First I'd like to know if the abbey is on good terms with Gregory."

"Not cordial but good. Politically speaking we're friendly."

I HAD thought so and nodded, well pleased. "Now am I right in assuming that in the current mess of affairs it is no extraordinary thing for a powerful fac-

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tion like yours to send legates to check up on the position and leanings of minor chieftains?"

"You are right," he said slowly.

"That's what I want then." I leaned toward him, calling on all the powers of persuasion I could command. "The abbey need not be committed to anything, father, but a neutral diplomatic representative arriving to investigate rumors and all that sort of thing could ask questions a wandering minstrel could not.

"He might discover where they have Conan imprisoned, and as a priest he might be permitted to talk with him where a layman wouldn't be. Then he could find occasion to tell me what's what, and step aside. I ask no more of you or him."

He met my urgence with unhurried calm. "If Conan's being sold, the abbey's interests will, of course, be vitally affected. All right. I take it that you wish Father Clovis to be the man?"

"If he's willing. Are you, Clovis?" I asked, dropping the "father" and appealing to him as a man and a friend.

"I'd like to. Will the father permit?"

"The father will," the abbot answered, "but remember that your part is that of one obtaining information only. You are to do nothing that will give the minutest inkling that the abbey is taking sides."

"Certainly, father. I suppose you're in a hurry, Finnian."

"Well, I want Conan, not his corpse."

"It won't take me long," he promised and left us briskly.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, father," I told the abbot fervently. With this added help, I felt with a surge of relief, there were some trifling grounds for hope.

He waved away my appreciation. "It is very little but the most I can afford," he stated, and he was speaking simple truth. Since the odds were in favor of Conan being killed and the power of his people broken, this was no time for any outsider to espouse his cause. Yet the abbot could see that Conan's fall would upset the balance of power and dangerously enhance Chilbert's hopes for empire.

"If I'm not successful," I said, "the count may promptly strike to take over everything in sight. Do you know what you will do?"

"I hope it won't come to that, but the abbey will be tributary to no one. If necessary we'll form alliances, but while I live we'll be vassals to God only."

Some men speak of how they will behave during perils not yet reached either to boast or to convince themselves, but this man spoke in the calm knowledge of how he would in truth act. He rose as Father Clovis returned and shook my hand with the vigor he brought to all things.

"Goodbye and all the good luck you'll badly need, my son."

"Goodbye, father." I nodded to the others. "Let's ride."

WE DIDN'T travel in company. Clovis at my request pushed on as fast as possible in order to be able to obtain the information I wanted before I arrived. About mid-afternoon I separated from Fulke.

We had been riding single file on a little-used woods trail, the spare horse between us. "The road isn't far from here," Fulke said over his shoulder. "Not more than a mile, I should say."

"And how far to the fort?"

"Say ten miles to be safe."

"Stop then." Sliding to the ground, I hitched my horse to a sapling. He imitated me, and we approached each other on saddle-stiffened legs. "Ten miles," I said. "I can make that on foot by sundown." That was important because few places admit strangers after that.

"What about me?"

"You'll follow with the horses later."

I knew he had been counting on going almost to the fort with me, and another man might have argued. He merely looked pained. "Do you know the place well?" I asked.

"I was there fairly recently to sing your tirade."

"Tell me which side is the best for our rendezvous, bearing in mind that we don't

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want to be cut off from this path here."

He closed his eyes the better to bring out his mental picture. "It's on a hill, Finnian, and a by-road leads up to the gate, which faces west. That would be our quickest route, but the peasants' houses line the road, and I couldn't get very near on that side. From the south, though, we could slant across open fields, and if we have any sort of start we could beat them out."

"That's it then. Work nearer in the dusk, and when it's dark get as near the southwest corner as you think you safely can." One good thing about a lawless land, as far as our purposes were concerned, was that everybody who could holed up by twilight. Fulke should run small risk of meeting any of Gregory's people.

"I'll count on your being on the grounds within an hour after nightfall," I told him. "And no matter what excitement you may hear going on in the fort, stay where you are unless Conan or I give you a yell."

"I'll stay put. What'll I do if you don't come by dawn?"

"Return to the trail here and wait for Father Clovis. If there's any use in your sticking around longer he'll give you instructions." There was no need to tell him what to do if the news was absolutely bad.

I took the extra sword and my harp from the lead horse. Fulke was a thoroughly saddened youngster as he watched me sling the instrument over my shoulder, and I grinned at him to cheer him up. "Sorry you're not joining us at dinner. See you later."

He smiled wanly. "Don't get killed any more than you have to."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### SECRET, SILENT SONG

IN A couple of hundred yards a good deal of the stiffness had worked out of my legs. When I reached the road, I took care to obliterate the tracks that showed whence I had come, then turned north, walking swiftly. At that, it was more than two hours before I got my first view of the fort.

As Fulke had said it was on a steep little hill. The walls were of the usual kind, earthworks topped with a low stockade. There were open fields all around the base of the hill, of course, and I was pleased to see that those on the south side had already been harvested. There were no obstacles to fast moving if we ever got under way.

I had been carrying both swords wrapped in my cape, with the hilts showing, so that it would be evident that I was trying to conceal nothing. That was not only a politely peaceful gesture: I wouldn't be allowed to wear either of them inside the fort anyhow, and it made the walking easier. Rounding into the by-road to the gate, I cut my pace to slow trudging and ascended the hill. From now on, I realized wryly, I had no plan of procedure.

Well, I was going in, and what would happen would happen. On the way up I had been trembling with nervousness and the foretaste of action, but as I halted before the fort I was suddenly calm again.

"I'd like housing for the night," I confidently informed the warder. At harvest time when food is plentiful few chiefs will refuse that to a person, who appears harmless, especially if he is geared to give something in return.

He took in my harp, ordered the gates open, and called down to one of a number of men loafing around the court. "Hey, Henri! Take this fellow to Gregory and find out whether or not he wants his head cut off."

As my guide took charge of me I looked around, not too pointedly. The place was quite strongly garrisoned, with a number of watchers stationed at various points on the walls. The buildings within were not remarkable, and I couldn't tell which one might be a prison. There was just the hall, a rambling composite of wings and leantos, and the ordinary assortment of barns and outhouses. At the door to the hall I was ordered to wait while my arrival was announced to Gregory.

To my surprise he came out instead of waiting for me inside. Father Clovis was

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with him. "Good evening; good evening, father," I saluted them in turn.

The monk held up his hand in an elaborate gesture of benediction. "Peace be with you," he intoned in Latin. "They won't let me get a word alone with him, but he's right in the hall here."

"Where are you from?" Gregory cut in impatiently on the tail of this. He was a broad, cold-faced man with a suspicious mind, and I saw what the porter meant. If my answers weren't right, he'd have me finished without hesitation.

"I came up from the Loire."

"Born south of here?"

That was a trap, because anyone listening could detect the accent in my speech. "No, I'm Irish. I've been playing for Louis and am on my way home from Paris."

"What are you doing up this way then?" he asked sharply.

Strolling minstrels were common enough, and I wasn't much afraid that he would connect me with the bard who had helped Conan and dropped out of sight months before.

"They were having Dane trouble along the river"—I knew he would have heard about that— "and I wanted to get well out of the way. The Danes may be gone now, but once I was in this country I thought I'd look it over. I'm in no hurry as long as there's business, and this time of the year it's always good."

"By business I suppose you mean singing and playing." He didn't suspect me, I saw; he was merely being thorough. "Why do you carry two swords?"

"One because a traveling man needs one, and the other because I was lucky with the dice at Angers." My story should hold until he had any reason to doubt me, but he considered for another lengthy moment while I fought to keep from showing my anxiety.

"Take him to the barn, Henri," he said curtly, and I stopped sweating. "And see that he leaves his weapons there."

"Thanks!" I beamed, relief lending an authentic note to my gratitude.

He merely grunted.

THEN, while Henri was showing me to the loft, I could at last give consideration to what the priest had said. Conan was apparently in the main hall, and the implication was that by day, at least, he had a certain amount of freedom.

If we dined inside, then, I might casually encounter him. I grimaced. But suppose that, in his astonishment at seeing me again, he should betray the fact that we were acquainted.

I thought about that while I climbed a ladder to a loft and stowed my belongings, my harp excepted, under some hay in one corner.

"You'll have lots of company, even not counting the rats," my cicerone called up to me. "It's harvest time, and we got a full house."

"I don't mind the rats," I said genially, and I meant it. Man would be far more dangerous.

He was gone by the time I'd descended. Tables, I saw, had been set up at the rear of the hall, and the call for dinner was imminent. While the others hurried to dinner it seemed a good time to make Conan aware of my presence. Or if he wasn't given liberty to eat with the assembly, I wanted to be in evidence in case Clovis could elude his host long enough to tell me anything he might have found out. Making a business of tuning my instrument, I strolled across the court.

I had barely taken my stand near the door of the hall when it opened for a man whose blinking eyes took me in indifferently before he ambled toward the tables. Gregory, right behind, nodded curtly in answer to my affable greeting. Clovis smiled with ecclesiastical benignity, and there were more following.

I struck a chord to cover the oath I muttered. That first man had been Conan, and his non-recognition hadn't been simulated. Emerging from the gloom of the hall into the comparative brightness of early twilight, he simply hadn't seen who I was.

The rest of the men started drifting toward the food, and I did likewise, seating myself as far from the chiefs as possible;

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I was looking for another opportunity to let my friend know I was there. But when the food was brought Father Clovis pounded on the table and rebuked those who would have pounced on the viands immediately.

"We are Christians, and we'll give thanks for what we are eating," he told them sternly. Some grumbled, but under his eyes all bent their heads.

Oh the good Latin, which only he himself, Conan, and I understood! I had liked that monk from the first, but now I loved him.

"The rat king has been sent for, but there's an Irish bard you'll remember at board with us now. He has horses beyond the walls." That was for Conan. There was all the unctuousness of professional piety in the priest's voice as he went on for both of us.

"The mean-eyed mongrel's game is to have the enemies bid against each other, the one for the cat's freedom, the other for his death. I think the louse has decided that the man from the south will win, but he thinks he can exact more from him this way. I couldn't find where they keep the cat at night, but he won't be there another. The butcher is expected in the morning.

"*Dominus.*" Father Clovis concluded loudly. "Amen."

HE SAT, the unleashed men commenced gobbling their victuals, and I took a needed pull at my wine. Conan now knew that I was not only there but that my arrival had not been accidental.

Also the predicament had been defined for both of us. All that was good, but the most important item of information was missing. I didn't know where Conan was kept during the night.

Knowing I must maintain my strength, I ate quite a bit, but I had no appetite for it. The only man there who had alike the ability and the willingness to tell me what I wanted to know was Conan himself, and my chances of getting a word alone with him were non-existent. Nor could our knowledge of foreign languages be of any more use, for they'd surely choke him off and as certainly grow suspicious of me, the stranger, if he should suddenly start saying anything in tongues they didn't comprehend like Danish, Irish, or—

I twitched. Conan knew Irish because he had studied at a monastery school in Ireland, and therefore he should know a trick I'd learned at a similar place. For the first time I stared down to where he sat next to Gregory, and even under the circumstances, or perhaps because of them, it was heartening to get a good look at him again. A moment later his gaze wandered listlessly in my direction, and I saw that he had already found me. Then he dropped his eyes and sat slumped.

At harvest time men begin early and work hard. When the day is finished, consequently, they demand drink and song, and a chief with any wisdom lets them have it. These were labor-hungry fellows, not epicures to linger over their food; but even so it was nearly dark when they had done and a great blaze had been started in an open fireplace to one side. There would be an hour or so of relaxation, and benches were dragged to ring the fire. Now was my time, and I claimed it.

Most of them applauded beforehand when I stepped forward, my harp a guarantee of entertainment.

"A minstrel!"

"Fine! Let's hear him!"

"How the hell can we unless you shut up?"

Gregory knew his business and smiled tolerantly as he held up his hand for silence. No doubt, with triumph envisioned for the morrow, he was feeling fairly jovial himself. I bowed to him when they were hushed.

"I should like to repay your generous hospitality with a few songs," I told him.

"Make it something gay for the season," he suggested.

Conan, sitting beside him, could now look at me in the natural order of things. He knew that I would speak to him if I could, and his eyes were alert in a still face. While I looked around, smiling

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acknowledgment of the audience's cheers and suggestions, I scratched one hand with the other, then flexed the fingers of my right hand before I touched the strings. That, I reasoned, would serve to show that I would signal rather than give verbal cues.

But whether Conan saw the gesture I could not be sure. It wouldn't pay to let my eyes rest on him too closely then.

At the monastery where I had been schooled it had long been a tradition for the boys to communicate with each other by hand ogham, and I was banking on the probability that its usefulness was known at every school in Ireland.

The ogham alphabet was originally designed for cutting words on stones or wands, letters being formed by combinations of one to five dashes in relation to a horizontal or vertical line; but an adaptation of it was eminently suitable for silent communication during classes or the interminable prayers that make up so large a portion of monastic routine. During prayers the nose was used as the transverse line while the fingers of the supposedly worshipping boy, his hand held reverently to his bowed head, would nimbly move back and forth to signal insults to some watching mate.

In the classroom the forearm could be used for the transverse, or the stylus. The harp strings would serve me. I was no longer adept at sending, and he would be rusty at receiving, but a thing at once so simple and so carefully practiced for years could never be forgotten. If I went very slowly he would be able to read.

WHEN all had quieted to listen I strummed a brief prelude and commenced singing. Thereafter my voice carried the burden of the tune, the harp supporting it with only occasional chords and runs of music between the stanzas.

It was simple and convincing.

While I sang my hands were at work. "Where?" I spelled. There was no response from Conan, and for a panicky moment I thought my scheme had failed. As I began the next strophe, however, my friend casually crossed his legs, ankle over knee. He could thus use his shin bone for the transverse, his signaling fingers looking as if they were tapping time to the melody.

"East wing," Conan spelled. I looked at Gregory, but he wasn't an attentive member of my auditors. His mind was on Chilbert's visit. Father Clovis was smiling lazily, but I saw his eyes roll to take in Conan. He knew that something was being accomplished between us. I started on another verse.

And kept my fingers busy—

"Door?" I asked. "No," Conan answered. That meant no egress except through the hall, which was bad.

"Window?" I spelled.

"Too small," was the answer.

"Guards," he told me next. "Two. Lights. All night." That was very bad. In fact, the more I learned the worse I felt. But I kept manfully at my song, and I could see that the boys were having a good time over it.

"Best wall?" I asked Conan. Having been there for some while and having, perhaps, visited the fort previously, he might know which steps up to the wall could be reached and climbed with the greatest chance of privacy, and also, where we could jump down with the least chance of breaking a leg.

"North," he answered, which wasn't good, either. That meant we'd have to circle half around the place before we could reach Fulke and the horses. I went into the final stanzas of my ballad, thinking hard.

There had been one other thing to find out. What about the three men who had accompanied him into the fort? Once outside, Conan might be able to do something for them, and I knew, the odds being what they were against even Conan escaping, that that was their only chance. Still he might refuse to leave without them.

I signaled him a question about them, and, to my great relief, his answer was "Later."

For one of the few times in my experience I took no note of the applause when

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I finished. I remember giving two or three other songs; then I excused myself and pretended to be very busy with the wine. Though as a matter of fact I drank almost nothing.

I had many things to think over in a very short time; but Gregory might start thinking about me if I abruptly took leave of the company. It was he himself who came to my rescue. He had an eye on the harvesting and sent his men to sleep early.

Which was what I wanted.

A DOZEN men, it turned out, were sharing the loft with me, but I got there first and gained the corner where my weapons were hidden. Those who straggled in after me had had enough wine on top of weariness to bring sleep suddenly. It would be a sound sleep, too, so that when I got ready to move none of them was likely to challenge me.

I lay on my back, open-eyed in the black dark, and methodically worked the problem over. I had pictured Conan as being in some convenient guard house out in the court, watched over by no more than one man at a time.

Such a sentinel could conceivably be slugged in peace and quiet, but as it was, there would be no such easy means of getting at my friend. Besides the two who stayed in a lighted room with him—they were taking no chances, sure enough!—there would be men bedded down in the main room of the hall, who'd rise at a word from the guards to overwhelm me.

The only solution was to have the garrison's attention thoroughly occupied elsewhere. Well, there was a means of doing that, though it would create new dangers. After a while I was sure that the risk was worth it, because there was no other way that seemed at all feasible. I considered where to begin and concluded that I could do no better than to operate in the barn where I then was.

Well, now it was coming. I used one of my old tricks for handling myself, running over some lines of amusing poetry to clear my mind of doubts and hesitation. Then I sat up.

Snores muted the rustling of the hay as I felt along the wall carrying the two blades still wrapped in my cape in such a way that they wouldn't rattle against each other. My harp I had left behind. If I survived, Conan could buy me another; if not, its loss would be a matter of no concern to me. I was too intent on the business in hand even to regret the destruction of a fine and prized instrument.

And too intent to worry.

One great thing about action, once it is thoroughly entered into, is its self-containment. It believes thoroughly in its power to complete itself. Nothing else seems possible, let alone logical.

By listening carefully to the snoring and heavy breathing, I avoided stepping on anybody, though I came near falling out of the loft when I reached the edge. A minute later I located the ladder, however, and descended to stand in the litter of hay on the floor below.

I could see a little there, but neither my eyes nor my ears could detect a possible watcher. Soft-footing it to the door, I saw that the court looked deserted. There was no sign of anyone being awake, but I knew there were guards on the walls. I stole back.

It didn't take long to make a pile of hay several feet high against the inside wall of the barn. The men above, I thought with hard humor, had better not sleep too soundly or they'd know all about Hell before they got there. Striking sparks to my tinder, I blew the glow to a flame.

The hay smoked heavily, then burst afire. I threw more on, and the blaze stretched, reaching up to the hay drooping down from the loft. One pendant wisp caught but dropped harmlessly. Another took fire and did not drop.

The little flame crept upward, got a grip on the main bulk of the hay, and spread like something spilled. A moment later there was the crackling of burning wood, and I waited for no more.

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK**

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# Argonotes.

## The Readers' Viewpoint

IF YOU haven't read Jim Kjelgaard's "Fox in the Bag," then do it ere you go further in this department. Because we and Mr. Kjelgaard are going to give the story away. The truth is that we were very dubious about Wayne McCloud's exceptionally coöperative skunk; we couldn't quite believe in such amenability. So we wrote Mr. Kjelgaard, and he came right back with all sorts of evidence to prove that we don't know anything about skunks. Well, we don't, and maybe you don't either; but here is the gentleman who does.

**JIM KJELGAARD**

Evidently you are an indoorsman instead of an outdoorsman since you question Wayne McCloud's friendship with a skunk. However, I'll be glad to offer proof.

From the New York Public Library—or directly from the Skunk Development Bureau, Chicago, Ill.—you can get "Skunk Culture for Profit" by T. M. Hilbrook. In it you'll find that skunks can be handled in the hands like kittens; that like kittens they are good mousers; that they don't fire unless frightened; and that "there is no animal that can be removed from the wild state and so quickly and thoroughly domesticated as a skunk, especially if taken young or partly grown."

I don't have the book with me but I think Ernest Thompson Seton, in "Wild Animals at Home," devotes several pages to skunks that have been tamed.

If these don't suffice, I'll put you in touch with six persons who have tamed skunks. My brother John and I once tamed five skunks, but in a controversy I'd rather keep skunks out of the family.

Let me know how much proof you want and I'll furnish it. If necessary I'll even have Wayne McCloud send you a tame one in a sack. But if you want one, be careful. Because a skunk left overnight in a bag would not be kindly disposed toward the person handling him in the morning if that handling wasn't very gentle.

# LOOKING AHEAD

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